

Implicit Religion in Popular Culture: the Religious Dimensions of Fan Communities

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Studies of the relationship between religion and popular culture are not new, and the past decade has seen a dramatic burgeoning of interest in this relationship. Explorations of everything from Star Trek to Elvis have appeared in the scholarly literature, often making comparative arguments regarding the religious dimensions of popular culture. However, when scholars explore the religious dimensions of fan communities, analyses tend to pathologize the implicitly religious dimensions of fan experience. The concept of “authenticity” is used to undermine and devalue the sacred spaces that fans create, raising the question of what it means to be authentically religious.

Fan communities generally, and Star Trek fandom specifically, can be implicitly religious for some fans. Far from being a pathological symptom of cultural consumption gone wrong, fandom can be seen as an integral vehicle for the articulation and experience of something deeply meaningful—a statement about what truly matters—as filtered through and symbolized by pop culture. Fan communities are, or at least can be, places that embody a person’s and/or a community’s expression of what it means to be human, to be in community, to be in space and time, to be moral or immoral, to be finite or eternal, to simply be. Implicit religion underpins ardent pop culture fandom, just as it underpins ardent explicit religion. For example, Star Trek conventions are “like” pilgrimage (Porter 1999; 2004); the NHL is “like” an ecclesia (Sinclair-Faulkner 1977); Elvis is “like” a saint (Doss 1999), and so on.

On the few occasions that scholars have asked the question whether such popular culture phenomena are merely “like” religion in some limited

regard, or whether they are genuinely and completely religious in their experience and expression, a distinction between pop-culture inspired spiritualities and mainstream religion is almost always maintained. And yet how can one differentiate something that looks and functions like religion from the “real thing?” Is there a difference? If something looks like, if someone acts like, if someone sees the world like, a religious person, does this not make the object, the action, and/or the perception “religious,” regardless of what secular category might also be applied to the phenomenon?

The nature of pop culture fan communities, or fandom, is an area that has also been the subject of numerous scholarly inquiries. According to Cheryl Harris and Alison Alexander (1998), in their work “Theorizing Fandom,” a fan is a member of an audience, broadly defined, who admires or appreciates the object of their attention—thus, one can be a fan of a television show, a performing artist, a chef, a hobby, a musical genre, and so on. Fandom—understood as fans within the social and cultural environments of their construction—is construed variously within contemporary society, but often in implicitly negative terms. Thus, fans and fan communities are conceived by corporate powers-that-be as uncritical markets for consumer goods, and as stigmatized and abnormal members of society—as “fanatics”—by the press and the rest of mainstream society. As Harris and Alexander consequently write (1998, 5), “much of the discussion around fandom has essentially pathologized it without leading us much closer to understanding this important phenomenon.”

Far from being a pathological response to popular culture, scholars of pop culture see fandom as a means of accommodation and resistance to dominant social and political structures. According to sociologist Cheryl Harris (1998, 45), for example,

fan practices are simply intensified, more visible instances of everyone's everyday struggle over cultural meanings and cultural space in a battleground of commodified culture... seen this way, each of us adopt[s] and implement[s], sometimes in concert with others, a series of coping mechanisms to [...] evade, resist and change cultural meanings that are centrally distributed.

For Harris, therefore, being a “fan” and participating in “fandom” are simply part of the spectrum of audience response to “centrally distributed” culture—whether that be network television, corporate record labels, Hollywood film studios, or other sources of “pop” media. In grouping together into communities based on appreciation for pop culture, fans “fight” for a

“cultural space” within which they can articulate, and create, meaningful environments for defining themselves and their place in the social and political world. As Harris writes (1998, 45), fandom can thus be understood as “a feature of everyday life, part of an ongoing struggle in which we all must engage to establish, maintain and repair our own sense of selves.”

Scholars of fandom frequently laud the efforts of fans to map out a meaningful space somewhere between appreciation for, and resistance to, dominant social and political messages embedded within popular culture (Jenkins 1992, 2006). However, when they question how fans utilize pop culture and fan communities to situate themselves in a larger, cosmic frame, analyses tend to lapse into the “pathologizing” mode of mainstream media. The problematic issue of “authenticity” is used to undermine and devalue the “sacred” spaces that fans create for themselves. This pattern is apparent even within theoretical models that claim to support the interpretation of popular culture and fan communities as potential sites for religious expression. David Chidester, for example, in his *Authentic Fakes*, (2005, viii), writes,

Participants in popular culture have described the sport of baseball, the consumer product of Coca-Cola, and the musical genre of rock-n-roll as if they were religions... [but] none of these things are religions, of course. Except: people say they are; they fit ‘classic’ academic definitions; and they do authentic religious work by negotiating what it means to be a human person in relation to transcendence, the sacred, or ultimate human concerns. As a kind of religious activity in American popular culture, they are all authentic fakes, doing real religious work in forging community, focusing desire, and facilitating exchange in ways that look just like religion.

Chidester's term—authentic fakes—highlights the discrepancy between “authentic” religion, and religion embedded within popular culture and expressed in fan communities. Such religion, for Chidester, could only ever be “fake,” no matter how indistinguishable it is from the “real” thing. And yet, if something looks like religion, acts like religion, and is experienced by someone religiously, why does the popular culture dimension of the phenomenon make it religiously and “authentically” “fake”? In all of his lengthy analyses, the answer to this question is unclear in Chidester's work. Chidester defines religion as “discourses and practices that negotiate what it is to be a human person in relation to the superhuman and in relation to whatever might be treated as subhuman.” He goes on to add (2005, vii–viii) “Since being a person also requires being in a place, religion entails discourses and practices for creating sacred space, as a zone for inclusion

but also as a boundary for excluding others.” Although Chidester concludes that a wide variety of popular culture phenomena meet these criteria, he nonetheless labels these pop-culture inspired phenomena as “fakes.” But: why? Can popular culture fandoms ever be considered “authentically” religious?

In addressing this topic, sociologist Adam Possamai (2005) avoids the use of the “fake” label, and suggests instead an alternative: “hyper-real.” According to Possamai (2005, 49–52), a “hyper-real” religion is a “simulacrum of a religion partly created out of popular culture which provides inspiration for believers/consumers.” Such religions are reflections of what he calls “hyper-consumerism,” a tendency to treat the world’s spiritual paths and pop culture equally as products for individual consumption. As a result, he argues, such religions are entirely derivative, a symptom of the decline of religious creativity in the late-capitalist age. They are also set over, above, or outside the bounds of “real” religion, and hence can only ever be considered copies of the “real” thing.

The question of authenticity, or “the real,” lies at the heart of these analyses. What does it mean to be authentically religious? What constitutes “real” religion? Integral to these and other works that exclude pop culture and its fans from the bounds of religious authenticity are assumptions about the nature of “the real” that are ultimately unwarranted. First and foremost is the assumption that pop culture constitutes an “inauthentic” source material for genuine religion. The created, creative and constructed nature of popular culture is contrasted, implicitly, to something more “genuine”—as if “authentic” religion’s source material is uncreated, unconstructed, and given *a priori*. Clearly, no matter what mainstream religious tradition and what mainstream religious source text we are talking about, this is not the case. Why then should the created, “artificial” source-texts of popular culture be seen solely as sources for inauthentic religious expression?

Further, for both Possamai and Chidester, one reason to question the authenticity of pop cultural religiosity lies in the assumption that because pop culture is referential—that is, because it draws upon, refers to, and “quotes” mainstream religious, social, and political ideas—it is derivative and consequently “fake.” This assumption leads scholars to see spiritualities informed by popular culture as mirrors to, commentaries on, and/or distortions of authentic religion, but never the “real” thing. And yet, clearly, mainstream religious traditions are themselves inherently referential—has there ever been a case where an “authentic” religious tradition emerged,

unaffected and untouched by the social, spiritual and political ideas and practices that preceded it? The answer to this question is clearly “no.” Mainstream religions, like spiritualities expressed through and/or inspired by pop culture, draw upon pre-existing sources for inspiration, admonition, and emulation. To be referential is not to be inauthentic, it is simply to be contextualized in the cultural milieu of the times.

Yet another point that permeates these analyses of pop cultural spiritualities is the value placed on authorial intent—“real” religion, apparently, draws on sources intended (by the author, or by the divine?) to be vehicles for and objects of religious experience. Pop culture, in contrast, is not “intended” (by and large) by its creators to act as a source for spiritual inspiration. Does this mean, however, that it cannot do so? Or does it mean that those who are, nonetheless, inspired by pop-culture, or who express their inspiration through pop-culture, are less authentic in their religiosity? The issue of authorial intent has been explored exhaustively in the scholarly literature, and has emerged as merely one of many factors that contribute to meanings in and of a source text.

Furthermore, it is not clear that all sources of “authentic” religious inspiration were intended by their original authors to be such. The Song of Songs, for example, is interpreted religiously as a parable of God’s love for his people—but was it intended to be such by its author? Additionally, it must be asked whether religious intent *is* lacking in some pop culture venues. Does Oprah Winfrey intend her talk show to act as a source of spiritual inspiration for her fans? It is entirely possible that she does. Did George Lucas intend his epic trilogies to act as sources of spiritual inspiration for Star Wars fans? According to at least one published interview, he did. Although interesting to ponder, authorial intent can never be the sole or even a major determining factor in how a source text is interpreted. It is in the impact of that text on its audiences that the religious import is to be found, and this is true for mainstream religious contexts, as well as those contexts informed by popular culture.

Yet another assumption that underpins the exclusion of pop cultural spiritualities from the perception of religious authenticity stems from the positioning of pop culture within a consumerist, individualist, and global capitalist economy by scholars. That pop culture is the product of a free market economy, and that its audiences in turn consume it as such, is unquestionable. However, that capitalism and consumption invalidate religion from a claim to religious authenticity is ridiculous. From pieces of the true cross, to the goat on a sacrificial altar, to the golden necklaces worn by

the well-dressed Hindu bride—the purchase of material (and immaterial) goods for religious consumption is widespread. That “authentic” religion should somehow be independent of, and in contrast to, consumerism, is a conceit founded in a conviction that “true” religion is set over and above the world, rather than embedded within it. In the contemporary global free market economy, it is entirely within patterns of cultural consumption that indicators of personal, social, political, and spiritual meaning are to be found.

Finally, these works suggest that pop culture inspired religiosity is inauthentic because it is individualized. According to Adam Possamai (2005, 132–133), for example,

... nothing new has been created in the religious field [since the 1950's]. We might even be experiencing a stasis in religion [because today] all belief systems and techniques are individualized. For example, there is no longer a quest for universal knowledge as found in older esoteric groups, but [instead] a quest for knowledge of the self... no new religious form has the time to develop “naturally” because of the way they are standardly individualized almost as soon as they are produced.

What does it mean for a religion to develop “naturally,” however? Why are individualized forms of spirituality unnatural? Are mainstream religions authentic solely because they were not individualized historically? If they have become largely individualized within the period of late capitalism, as Possamai suggests, does that mean they are inauthentic today? Clearly, mainstream religions have become much more individualized in the contemporary period than they may have been historically, but equally clearly the majority of religious studies scholars would not call them inauthentic as a result. Why then should individualized forms of spirituality inspired by pop culture be marginalized because they are individualistic? And, is it really true that contemporary spiritualities informed by pop culture are wholly, or even predominantly, individualized? What role does the community of fandom play in constructing a normative, consensual frame within which individual spiritualities are expressed?

Although it is undeniable that fans consume pop culture on an individual basis, and construct and express their spiritual views through a variety of individually chosen source texts, the role of the fan community—fandom—in negotiating meaning is often underestimated by scholars. Individual fans, and fan communities, are about much more than a kind of narcissistic consumption of mass-mediated culture. Pop culture fandoms are constructed and negotiated by individuals seeking a forum and a com-

munity within which to articulate and experience something important and deeply meaningful in their lives. The level of fan participation varies greatly. The strength of appreciation for the object of fandom also varies greatly from person to person. But for those for whom the object of appreciation and the community built around its admiration is of central importance, something deeply meaningful is being expressed. Fandoms are not therefore the pathological symptom of cultural consumption gone wrong, but are instead an integral vehicle for the articulation and experience of something deeply meaningful—a statement about what truly matters—as filtered through and symbolized by pop culture. They are, or at least can be, a place that embodies a person's and/or a community's expression of the essence of all meaning: what it means to be human, to be in community, to be in space and time, to be moral or immoral, to be finite or eternal, to simply be. As a result, pop culture fandoms are implicitly religious. Implicit religion underpins ardent pop culture fandom, just as it underpins ardent explicit religion.

According to Religious Studies scholar Edward Bailey (2006), implicit religion can be found in those unexpected and infrequent “transcendent” experiences of the numinous that come upon individuals unexpectedly, but is also to be found in times of ordinary consciousness. He suggests that implicit religion is to be found (2006, 8)

... when someone's (or some group's) basic beliefs about the way the world is or should be (which may hitherto have been unconscious, even to themselves) are affirmed (“Here I stand”)—or are changed; when what we “must” (or “must not”) do, has priority over what we merely “can” (or “cannot”) do, and when we discover who is most profoundly “one of us” (or “not one of us”) and “whose side we are on,” “when the chips are down.”

Uncovering what a person stands for, what they feel they must or must not do, who they feel they are, who they belong with, and how they ultimately situate themselves in their own personal history, their community, the world, and the cosmos, is the essence of understanding implicit religion in pop culture fandom contexts.

For Bailey, implicit religion becomes apparent when one asks what a person is committed to; when one uncovers the integrating foci of their individual and communal experience; and when one reveals the ways in which commitments and integrating foci transcend the narrow confines of specific experiences to affect the entirety of a person's life (what Bailey terms “intensive concerns with extensive effects.”) So what is it that fans of popular culture are committed to? Although the answer to this question

differs, depending upon which fan community one is discussing, the example of Star Trek fandom can act as an illustration of the implicit religious dimension of fan communities.

And so, what is it that Star Trek fans are committed to? Although the mainstream media sometimes portray Star Trek fans as committed to nothing more than the memorization of ridiculous quantities of Trek-related trivia, and an absurd refusal to differentiate between a television show and “real life,” an examination of the things on which fans spend vast amounts of time, creativity, financial resources, and mental and emotional energy reveals a complex picture of the nature of individuality, community, humanity, and destiny that helps shape the lives of, and is shaped by, Star Trek fans and fandom. Multiculturalism, tolerance for diversity, evolutionary progress, human potential, political non-interference, sexual equality, free will, scientific and technological progress, and a triumphant human destiny that transcends biological limits, are some of the dominant ideological commitments of fans. Concepts such as the Prime Directive, and Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations, both taken from the television franchise, act as integrating foci for both individuals and Star Trek fan communities. Support for the United Nations, volunteering at food banks and soup kitchens, giving blood to the Red Cross, donating time and money to children’s charities, and supporting political candidates who embody the ideals that fans associate with Star Trek, are a few of the ways in which fans reveal the extensive effects of these ideals on their everyday lives.

Star Trek fans self-identify as such: to be a committed Star Trek fan is a defining characteristic of one’s self and one’s life. Star Trek, and the ideals that the television franchise is seen by fans as embodying, is consequently the “place upon which they stand.” It is, furthermore, the place that allows them access to something greater than themselves—Star Trek fans speak of Star Trek as something that gives them hope for the future, that provides solace in times of grief or fear, that motivates them to keep going when life seems darkest, that sparks in them the experience and the conviction that life makes sense, that humanity has a purpose, and that we all have a part to play in manifesting the vision that Star Trek represents. Star Trek defines for fans what it means to be human, and what it means to be inhuman. It says something about the way things are, and the way things should (and can) be. It maps out a means for attaining the ideal, and it acknowledges the pitfalls that confront humanity on its journey to greatness. It is, ultimately, the vehicle for expressing the implicit religion of fans.

So, are Star Trek fans (or Disney fans, or Elvis fans, and so on) religious? I used to avoid this question wherever possible, and when asked point blank by journalists, would generally answer “no.” No, they are not religious about Star Trek, I would say, Star Trek fandom is simply “like” religion in terms of the beliefs, practices, and ideological commitments of fans. However, I have come to realize that in part, my reluctance to acknowledge publicly the implicit religious dimensions of fandom stemmed from a fear of further pathologizing an already stigmatized category.

As Erika Doss (1999, 74) writes with regard to Elvis fandom,

If religion was “respectable and respected” at the close of the 1950s, today it is spoofed or under constant surveillance by a popular press that is generally uneasy with displays of religious emotionalism and obsessed more with religious misconduct than with genuine, deeply felt human needs for intimations of the divine.

She goes on to write,

Fringe religions, moreover, are almost always held up against the standards and values of mainstream religions, so most media accounts... [and, we might parenthetically add, most scholarly accounts] frame [...] fans as abnormal outsiders whose faith doesn’t follow institutionalized spiritual practices.

Analyses of religion and popular culture that insist on differentiating “authentic” religion from popular culture-inspired fakes, “real” religion from consumer-based “simulacrums,” do not do justice to the depth and meaningfulness of fandom. If something looks like, if someone acts like, if someone sees the world like a religious person, it doesn’t matter whether the framework for expressing this mode of being is drawn from popular culture or from existing mainstream faiths.

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