

**Worshipping the Text:  
Fandom as Religious Practice in Modern Society**

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I explore the ways in which fan activity satisfies the lack of ritualized worship left by the secularization of modern society. It has often been posited that religions are created by humanity to satisfy some inherent need for belief, ritual, and an interpretive paradigm for navigating life. Presently in Western society, a large part of the population lives a generally secular lifestyle; even if many people celebrate technically religious holidays, their worldviews are not built with religious tenets. I theorize that for many people, fandom serves as a substitute for this sort of religious activity. Fandom provides an environment for the subsuming of self in a greater narrative. Fan texts are modern mythology, their archetypal characters ripe for investment with belief. This belief leads to fan practices that are comparable to religious practices. Fans sanctify the watching of weekly television shows like a sabbath. Fan tours to significant locations are transcendent in the same way as pilgrimages to holy sites. Fans deify the creators of texts and canonize fans that gain prominence. Finally, fans absorb the ideology of a fan text, incorporating the text's representations of concepts such as morality and duty into their own. Fan engagement with texts is, I argue, directly comparable to religious adherents' engagement with holy texts, and fan activity serves as a modern kind of religion.

*All human beings have an innate need to hear and tell stories and to have a story to live by ... religion, whatever else it has done, has provided one of the main ways of meeting this abiding need.*

*-Harvey Cox<sup>1</sup>*

In July of 2006, I attended a screening of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* that was part of a Harry Potter convention called Lumos. Generally movie screenings at Harry Potter conventions are very raucous and participatory, and this was no exception. But there was one moment that stood out. During the scene when Harry and Sirius are attacked by a horde of Dementors, Harry shouts the spell to repel them. At this point, without a word being said, the vast majority of the audience took out their wands, extended their arms towards the screen, and yelled with Harry: *Expecto patronum!* We, the fans watching this film that we all revered, knew how to act, in a way that seemed like more than a call-back. It seemed like ritual, endowed with ceremony and symbolism. It struck me that the observance of media fandom causes much of the same behavior as the observance of religion.

### **The Human Need for Worship and the Secularization of Society**

I admit immediately here that I am no theologian, nor am I a psychologist or a social scientist. I can offer only my own observations and beliefs on ideas concerning religion and history—and concerning fandom, for that matter. For most of human history, society was religious rather than secular—indeed, the concept of the secular is relatively modern. Religion was a framework for people's daily lives, which revolved around ritualized worship within the paradigm of theological narratives. It's been proposed that religion is a construct meant to provide explanations for concepts which are now understood through science, but it has also been commented that religion served another purpose, as in the quote from Harvey Cox at the head of my paper. Religion allowed humans to subsume themselves in a greater narrative, to have “a story to live by,” and the secularization of society has eroded this ability. If, as some argue, this need for an overreaching narrative is innate to humanity, it is inevitable that a substitute will be found, and it is my theory that fandom serves this purpose for

many fans. Throughout this paper, I will present examples of a religious practice and how fandom mirrors this practice to explore the idea that fandom acts as a religion for many fans.

It's worth noting here that I've noticed, experientially, some trends in the population of fandom that would suggest that fans are less religious than the general population, and ergo more likely to have a religion-substitute. The most secular portion of American society is middle-class, white, and liberal, and most fans fit this description. My evidence for this claim is anecdotal, an amalgamation of discussions on silencing in fandom, especially the silencing of conservatives and people of color. I do not think that this claim is essential to my argument, but I do find it a productive avenue of thought.

### **Fan Texts as Popular Mythology**

What we now call mythology used to be the holy stories of historical cultures. Mythological narratives provided a society with a sort of universality of understanding based on archetypical figures and themes. In contemporary society, many fan texts yield these same concepts. Where the Greeks had Achilles and the Norse had Baldur, modern America has Superman. Many fan texts are also part of the popular discourse and iconography. Sherlock Holmes, for example, is popular shorthand for the figure of the detective and even the concept of figuring things out (“no shit, Sherlock”). This symbolic, archetypical nature of the figures in many fan texts makes it easy to invest belief in them. They are already larger-than-life; thinking of them as mythological is a short leap.

### **“Don't talk during my show!”: Weekly Episodes as Sabbath**

The original conception of the sabbath in Judaism was as a time set aside from the quotidian for prayer and reflection on holiness and God; in other words, working with the model of religion as overreaching narrative, the sabbath is meant to be a time to subsume oneself in the story. The weekend, or course, no longer serves this purpose for most people. But for many, the hour spent watching a favorite show is sacrosanct. In my house, it's *Lost*; for others, it's *Heroes* or *Battlestar Gallactica*. Sometimes the object of fandom isn't a narrative show but a sports event like a weekly football game.

For these fan texts, the time spent watching a new installment is ritualized, one evening a week being entirely structured around that hour, all distractions eliminated. This time is an opportunity to get completely absorbed in the text in a way that many find restful and fulfilling. Weekly broadcasts of object-of-fandom shows allow a time set out from every day life, in much the same way as a sabbath.

### **The Journey to Middle Earth: Fan Tours as Pilgrimage**

In Ancient Greece, supplicants made the journey to Delphi to query the oracle. Present-day Catholics visit shrines like the spring at Lourdes to pray. Every Muslim is required to perform the Hajj to Mecca at least once. All of these journeys are pilgrimages, trips to places of great significance. In *Lord of the Rings* fandom, Ringers make pilgrimages to New Zealand, where the movies were filmed. Reviews left on the website of one tour company, Red Carpet Tours<sup>2</sup>, attest to meaningful nature of this experience, with fans describing how their trip was “the most incredible thing I have ever done,” “the greatest journey of a lifetime,” and “life-changing.” Several assert that New Zealand “really IS Middle Earth”. Clearly, the experience was a transcendent one for many fans, providing a kind of spiritual fulfillment that comes with an experience of holiness.

### **Deification and Canonization: The Creator and the Big-Name Fan**

ThinkGeek.com<sup>3</sup>, a web-based store targeted at self-identified “geeks,” used to sell a t-shirt that reads “Joss Whedon is my master now” in the *Star Wars* font. This shirt falls into the “we laugh because we understand” school of thought: it plays off the fact that Joss Whedon's sci-fi series *Firefly* is better than Episodes 1 – 3 of *Star Wars*. In making this joke, the shirt refers to both Whedon and George Lucas as “master” of the wearer. Whedon and Lucas are follow a model of creator that is deified in fandom. If the canon of a fan text is sacred to fans, and the word of the creator is canon, then the word of the creator is holy writ.

Many fans make reference to this species of deification in a lighthearted way. TVGuide.com<sup>4</sup>, for example, hosts a blog plainly entitled “Joss Whedon is my God”; that phrase yields over a thousand

results when searched on Google. The creators of fan texts have a great deal of control over the emotions of fans due to the emotional investment of fans in the text. This leads to respect and reverence for the creators, such that the statement “Joss Whedon is my God” is only halfway a joke.

Fans that rise to prominence within fandom, generally known as Big-Name Fans or BNFs, gain a measure of this respect. If creators are gods, BNFs are the saints of fandom, figures of virtue that are holier than the rest of us. In many cases, BNFs actually have closer contact with creators than the average fan. J. K. Rowling was interviewed by a number of BNFs on *PotterCast*, a podcast produced by the Harry Potter news site The-Leaky-Cauldron.org<sup>5</sup>. *MuggleCast*, from the fansite Mugglenet.com, has a devoted following of its own. This sub-fandom yields such signs of devotion as a Facebook group entitled “*MuggleCast* is the best thing to ever happen to me besides *Harry Potter*.”<sup>6</sup> Note how *MuggleCast* is put on almost-equal footing with the original fan text. Some fans of *MuggleCast* started a podcast called *MuggleTalk*<sup>7</sup> consistent of commentary on MuggleCast and its hosts. In many ways, the *MuggleCast* following can be seen as a splinter sect of the religion of Harry Potter fandom, with fans pledging devotion to the hosts as saints or demigods.

### **The Commandments of Fandom**

Fan texts generally don't contain an explicit list of axioms or directions for their audiences like the Torah or the Qu'ran. But, like many mythologies, they do contain ideologies that can be passed on to audiences. Here I point to Barbara Adams, the fan in *Trekkies* who discussed her jury duty as in line with her Starfleet ideals. Encoded within *Star Trek* and all fan texts are ideas of concepts like morality, gender, and bravery which are passed on to fans. In this way, the ideology of a fan text can shape the fan in much the same way that the ideology of a religion shapes adherents.

### **Conclusions**

I've discussed how fans' emotional investment in fan texts leads to fandom becoming a kind of religion. Many fan practices are directly comparable to religious observances, especially observances

that were more common in a less-secularized era. Modern fans have gods, saints, and pilgrimages, and live by the ideologies espoused by their objects of fandom. Fandom in the modern era has, for some, taken the place of religion as “a story to live by,” a greater narrative in which one can subsume oneself.

#### Notes

1. Cox, Harvey. The Seduction of the Spirit. Simon and Schuster, New York, NY. 1973.
2. <[http://www.redcarpet-tours.com/guestbook\\_comments.cfm](http://www.redcarpet-tours.com/guestbook_comments.cfm)>. Accessed 24 April, 2008.
3. These shirts are now sold at: <<http://www.pvpstuff.com/jowhismymano.html>>. Accessed 24 April, 2008.
4. <<http://community.tvguide.com/blog/Joss-Whedon-God/800027639>>. Accessed 24 April, 2008.
5. <<http://pottercast.the-leaky-cauldron.org/jkrowling>>. Accessed 24 April, 2008.
6. <<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2236154037>>. Accessed 24 April, 2008.
7. <<http://muggletalk.mypodcast.com/>>. Accessed 24 April, 2008.