

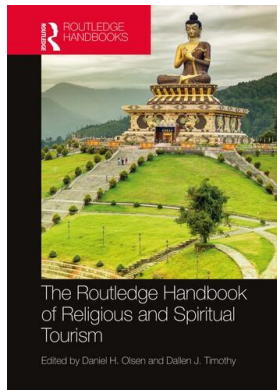
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FAN PILGRIMAGE, RELIGION, AND SPIRITUALITY

Daniel H. Olsen

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the connections between popular culture, religion, and spirituality. However, these connections have tended to be marginalized by several scholars, in part because of their tendency to “categorize some religions as normal and some as deviant” (Pike 2009: 67). As Orsi (2005: 188) puts it, within the study of religion, there are some “ways of living between heaven and earth” that should be excluded, marginalized, and given the status of the “Other”—that do not fit nicely into the more general definitions of religion, and as such, act as foils for what experts consider to be religion. This marginalization has occurred not just because of the difficulty in defining religion (Harrison 2006; Oman 2013; Neville 2018) but also in part because of the difficulty in defining what exactly constitutes “popular culture”. Indeed, popular culture is not a “thing” that can be studied (Mitchell 1995). As Storey (2006: 1) notes, the study of “popular culture” for many scholars is the study of “otherness”—where popular culture is compared and contrasted to other conceptual categories, such as “folk culture, mass culture, dominant culture, working-class culture”, as well as “high” and “avant-garde” culture.

This division between high and popular culture, however, stands in stark contrast to post-modern views that attempt to dissolve the seemingly restrictive boundaries between pilgrimage and tourism as well as the sacred/secular divide (Kaelber 2006; Collins-Kreiner 2010; Olsen 2010). From this perspective, modern tourism takes on some of the traditional characteristics of pilgrimage, with modern pilgrims being considered a sub-type of tourist (MacCannell 1976; Graburn 1989; Timothy & Olsen 2006). This view has been accompanied by a reconceptualization of what constitutes sacred and profane space, what is meant by “transcendence”, and how experiences formerly in the realm of religion are translated into non-religious contexts (Evans 2003; Knoblauch 2008; Knox & Hannam 2014; Shilling & Mellor 2014). These dissolvings of boundaries have led to travel to and activities at sporting events and stadiums, war memorials and other sites related to nationalism, and, indeed, any type of activity, being considered a pilgrimage and/or a religio-spiritual experience.

However, it is now impossible to ignore the influence that popular culture, religion, and spirituality have on each other. The purpose of this chapter is to briefly examine some of

the ways in which fandoms have become interwoven with religion and spirituality. In doing so, this chapter examines both “religion = fandom” (Zubernis & Larsen 2018: 154), or how religious practices and terminology are used to explain the development of narratives and identities that connect to people to something they consider to be sacred, and “fandom = religion” (Hills 2000: 13), or how fandoms have led to the development of “invented religion[s]” (Cusack 2013; Taira 2013; Lužný 2020) and “fiction-based religion[s]” (Davidsen 2013; Cusack & Kosnáč 2016). Both angles of inquiry focus on certain symbolic aspects of popular culture that are used in ways that “go...beyond culturally marked religiosity” (Knoblauch 2008: 148). The chapter begins with a discussion of what constitutes “fandom” and highlights the “waves” or topics of research on fandoms more generally. Then, the chapter examines the interconnections between fan pilgrimage, religion, and spirituality, focusing first on “religion as fandom” or some of the similarities between fandom and religion, and then on “fandom as religion”, or how some fandoms have become in part fiction-based religions, before concluding.

What is fandom?

Like most attempts by academics to define an object or subject of interest, a search for a definitive definition of “fandom” can be daunting. While the growth and influence in modern society over the past 30 years (Fuschillo 2020) of “fandoms” and “fans” have led to their taken-for-granted status in present lexicons, fandoms entail “multiple and ongoing cultural processes” (Nikunen 2007: 113) related to the intersection of ever evolving ideas regarding culture, consumption, and community. In addition, there is a wide range of ways in which fans can engage in fandoms (Williams 2011). As Sandvoss (2005: 10) argues, the “true core” of some fans is the “communal context of their fandom”, while for other fans, “their fandom is driven more by an idiosyncratic bond with their object of fandom”.

However, this has not stopped scholars from attempting to define this area of research. For example, according to Fiske (1992: 30), fandom is a common feature in industrialized societies where aspects of mass-produced and -distributed forms of entertainment are taken and “reworked into an intensely pleasurable, intensely signifying popular culture that is both similar to, yet significantly different from, the culture of more ‘normal’ popular audiences”. Sandvoss (2005: 8) suggests that fandoms involve the “regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text”. For Davis (2015: 423), “fandom is a term used to refer to a subculture composed of fans characterized by a feeling of sympathy and camaraderie with others who share a common interest”.

In this context, a “fan” is a person who is a “communal participant” in a fandom related to a sport, form of media, activity, or a famous person or group (Kirby-Diaz 2009: 147). Kirby-Diaz (2009: 147) argues that to be a fan, one needs to be more than consuming an activity, such as movie watching, book reading, or watching sports on TV. Rather, to be a fan means to be heavily engaged in “text” or a particular “team”, to be an active participant with that text or team (Jenkins 2018). For fans, belonging to a fandom represents “forging a shared identity and consciousness by providing members with a sense of collective belonging based on strong interpersonal bonds similar to family-like ties” (Fuschillo 2020: 349). In this vein, Jenson (1992: 27) suggests that for many people, “Fandom is an aspect of how [people] make sense of the world, in relation to mass media, and in relation to [their] historical, social, [and] cultural location”. For Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington (2007: 10), fandoms are an important part of how people “form emotional bonds with [themselves] and others in a modern, mediated world”.

Sandvoss, Gray, and Harrington (2017) suggest that historically there have been three different waves of research related to “fan studies” or “fandom studies”. The first research wave was treating fandom as a form of activism—a reaction by regular people against high cultural elites, media producers, and industries that denigrated certain aspects of mass or lower culture, such as pop music, comic books, romance novels, and movies that have mass appeal (Fiske 1992). From this perspective, people who were a part of fandoms were characterized as groups of disenfranchised persons who, being subaltern, powerless, and marginalized within their societies, were deviant in their popular culture interests and expressions, leading fans to be branded as pathologically fanatic in their devotion to their fandoms (Jenson 1992; see Fuschillo 2020). However, as fandoms moved from being a marginalized segment of society into the cultural mainstream, a second research avenue began to focus on the sociology of consumption, examining how broader cultural and social hierarchies were replicated in fan communities and subcultures. While still interested in the broader concerns regarding power and inequality within society, scholars focused more on developing typologies of individual and collective practices. However, as Sandvoss, Gray, and Harrington (2017: 6) note, this research “had little to say about the individual motivations, enjoyment, and pleasure of fans”. This led to a third wave of research on fandom, which considers the growing number of fandoms in the face of what they call fandom’s “growing cultural currency”, where “being a fan [has become] an ever more common mode of cultural engagement” (p. 6). Instead of fandoms being relegated to specialized and themed fan conventions, digital technologies and social media have led to the development of broader fandoms and the closer integration of fandoms with the everyday lives of fans everywhere. In addition, this wave of research focuses on “intrapersonal pleasures and motivations among fans, focusing on the relationship between fans’ selves and their fan objects’ (p. 6).

Another, newer, research avenue involves “post-fandoms” or “post-object fandoms”. Williams (2011: 269) defines “post-object fandom” as a “fandom of any object which can no longer produce new texts”. For example, the ending or cancellation of TV serials such as *Firefly*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *The West Wing*, or book series like *Harry Potter*—each of which had almost cult-like followings—has led to “fan practices and interactions inevitably chang[ing]” (Williams 2011: 269) as these fan objects move from “ongoing to dormant” (Williams 2015: 14). When this occurs, questions arise regarding how fans shift from one object of fandom to another, how fans attempt to extend their fandoms or revive/rejuvenate dormant texts or objects, and why some fans grow “stagnant” or “retire” from fandoms (Que 2014; Lee 2015).

Academic research on specific types of fandoms has grown dramatically in the past two decades. These fandoms, as noted above, range from books and comics to TV serials, movies, sports teams, and music groups. As Jenkins (2018) notes, fandoms are generally categorized by single texts or celebrities, with fans either being given or creating their own nicknames to describe their affinity and associated bonds to these texts and celebrities. Some examples include:

- *Musicians/groups*: “ARMY” (K-pop group BTS) (Lee, Oh & An 2019; McLaren & Jin 2020); “Beliebers” (Justin Bieber) (Sherbine 2013); “BeyHive” (Beyoncé) (Blyth 2017); and “Directioners” (One Direction) (Korobkova 2014; Arvidsson et al. 2016);
- *TV serials*: “Browncoats” (*Firefly*) (Wilcox 2015; McCormick 2018); “Sherlockians” (*Sherlock Holmes*) (Stein & Busse 2014; Hills 2017); and “Whovians” (*Doctor Who*) (Wright & Wright 2015);

- *Movies*: “Trekkies” (Star Trek) (Jindra 1994; Coppa 2008) and “Warsies” (*Star Wars*) (Kruger 2015); and
- *Books*: “Potterheads” (*Harry Potter*) (Lee 2015) and Janeites (*Jane Austen*) (Yaffe 2013; Glosson 2020; Seaton 2020).

At the same time, fandoms are also “better understood as a more expansive subculture... whose members engage with a broad array of different media objects but who share traditions and practices built up over many years” (Jenkins 2018: 16). Because of this, several articles and books, along with the *Journal of Fandom Studies*, have looked at fandoms from a broader perspective, including:

- “Anime fandom” (Leonard 2005; Napier 2006; Ito, Okabe & Tsuji 2012);
- “Media fandom” (Hills 2000; Coppa 2006);
- “Music fandom” (Duffett 2013a; Giuffre 2014);
- “Sports fandom” (Brown 1998; Wann & James 2018);
- “Video game fandom” (Swalwell, Ndalianis & Stuckey 2017; Brown et al. 2018; Moreno 2020); and
- Fandom more generally (Pearson 2010; Duffett 2013b; Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington 2007; Booth 2018).

Intersections between fan pilgrimage, religion, and spirituality

Duffett (2013a: 18) argues that attempts to define “fandom” lead to a reification of this object of study, “stopping the process of fandom and artificially trying to pin it down”. Instead, he suggests, following Cavicchi (1998), that instead of focusing on what fandom *is*, the emphasis should be on what fandom *does*. By extension, this should lead to discussions regarding what fandoms do *to* fans. This section focuses on this last part through investigating ways in which fandoms, religion, and spirituality are interrelated. As noted above, two ways to understand these relationships include “religion as fandom” and “fandom as religion”.

Religion as fandom

Many scholars have turned to religious terminology to metaphorically describe, for example, tourism as a “sacred journey” or a form of modern pilgrimage (MacCannell 1976; Graburn 1989; Knox & Hannam 2014; Olsen 2014) or people’s quasi-religious ties to nationalistic dogmas, ideals, and rites (i.e., “civil religion”; see Bellah 1975; Haberski Jr. 2018). This metaphorical extension also extends to research on fandoms in attempts to understand how fan communities are maintained and how fandom activities affect or transform fans. Within this context, several scholars suggest that there are strong ties between popular culture, fandoms, religion, and spirituality (Jindra 1994; Istoft 2010; Davidsen 2013; Buljan & Cusack 2015). For example, Hills (2002: 118) notes that both religion and fandom “are both centered around acts of devotion, which may create similarities”, leading Hills to suggest that fandoms exhibit a type of “neoreligiosity” or neospirituality. Aden (1999: 152) also suggested that like the pilgrim’s journey, fandom travel consists of “separation” or the beginning of the journey, the “liminal stage”, which includes the journey, experiences at the shrine, encountering the “sacred”, and “reaggregation” or the return home. Because of space, this chapter highlights only a few inter-related ways in which fandoms are akin to religion, including visiting sacred places, liminality and *communitas*, ritual and performance, affective experiences, and politicization.

Visiting sacred places

Travel to sacred places has long been an important part of religion and integral in the creation and maintenance of both individual and group religious identities and sacred geographies (Olsen 2012b, 2019). Religious pilgrimage has also long influenced politics, economic development, and societal cohesiveness at local, regional, national, and transnational scales (Coleman & Eade 2018). Presently, an estimated 600 million people visit religious sites to perform religious rituals or for educational purposes (UNWTO 2011). Pilgrimage sites, which range from entire holy cities to natural sacred sites to the burial spots of holy men and women (Shackley 2001), draw religious people for a variety of reasons, including curiosity, worship, initiatory and/or cleansing rituals, healing, to be educated, and to maintain religious identities (Morinis 1992; Olsen 2012b). When these sites are deemed to be sacred, whether for mystic-religious or historical reasons (Jackson & Henrie 1983), they are demarcated from the surrounding profane space and are maintained as sacred space—which sacredness is reinforced by pilgrims and tourists who travel to this site because it is sacred (Bremer 2004). Both pilgrims and tourists who visit these sites want these sites to be authentic. As Bremer (2004: 3–7) argues, many tourists are generally concerned with aesthetic (primarily authentic) experiences as they journey, which frame their experiences of religion, while religious travelers seek authentic religious experiences which can be enhanced through aesthetics.

Like many religions, fandoms are intimately tied to places related to aspects of their particular fandom, whether literary, media, sports, or virtual in nature. As Zubernis and Larsen (2018: 151) argue, “[fans do not] experience the things [they] love—films, television shows, books, music—as just a text, but as a site of intense emotional engagement”. While for some fans watching their favorite TV show or reading their favorite book might be considered a “symbolic pilgrimage” (Brooker 2017), Yamamura (2020) notes that fandoms eventually transition from being fans of the objects of fandoms to being fans of the places associated with fandoms. These places or sites are sometimes referred to as “power spots”, “sacred sites” (Okamoto 2019), or “venerated fan spaces” (Geraghty 2019). As noted by Zubernis and Larsen (2018: 149), “When fans love a movie, book, or television show, they often want to take an active role in connecting with that world and the characters (or actors) in it”, which connectivity comes in part through traveling to places that are an integral part of the establishment of these fandoms. For example, many fans travel to cities in which a movie or TV serial was filmed (e.g., Vancouver and Melbourne) (Brooker 2007). These cities are “multiply coded” (Brooker 2007: 430), meaning that because they are settings for multiple fandoms, the importance of the urban landscape will differ for each fan. Another type of power spot includes specific locations where the filming of a movie or TV serial took place (Beeton 2005). Some examples include:

- The spot where Sherlock Holmes jumped to his death outside St. Bartholomew’s Hospital in *Sherlock* (Toy 2017; Zubernis & Larsen 2018);
- Graceland, home of Elvis Presley (Duffett 2003; Brooker 2007);
- The town of Forks, WA, the location for the *Twilight* book and movie series (Crowe 2013; Larson, Lundberg & Lexhagen 2013);
- Iceland and Northern Ireland for *Game of Thrones* enthusiasts in search for the fictitious land of Westeros (Brooker 2007; Murray 2017a, 2017b); and
- “Hobbiton”, the film set for scenes in *The Lord of the Rings* movies (Singh & Best 2004; Davis et al. 2014).

Cemeteries and the individual burial plots of famous celebrities are also a common power spot for fans (Barron 2014; Levitt 2018), as are fandom-themed conventions like Comic-Con and theme parks that are based on popular anime and manga publications (Dunn & Herrmann 2020), such as “Naruto World” and “J-World” in Japan. Whether multi- or single-fandom in nature, conventions in particular serve as “liminal spaces” (see below) or “sites of performance, play, veneration, and community” for like-minded “believers” to connect with objects and communities of veneration (Zubernis & Larsen 2018: 145). Conventions serve as “decentered” places, where it is the fandom, not the place, which “represents the true center of the convention pilgrimage process” (Porter 2004: 168).

These fandom power spots sometimes overlap with religious sites. For example, fans of the anime *Lucky Star* visit the Washinomiya Shrine in Kiku, Japan, because the shrine was used as inspiration for some of the illustrated backgrounds in the anime. Once fans made the connection between the shrine and the anime, visitation to the shrine increased from 90,000 to 300,000 in one year (Okamoto 2019: 150). As well, many Buddhist shrines in Japan utilize elements of popular culture and fandom, such as Hello Kitty, as mascots to brand themselves to younger generations based on contemporary socioeconomic circumstances (Porcu 2014; Maud 2017).¹ Sugawa-Shimada (2015) discusses the *rekjio* phenomenon in Japan—where young women have taken a strong interest in Japanese history. As part of this phenomenon, these “history fan girls” also visit Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines, which are considered “power spots”, to gain spiritual power. There are also examples of Christian groups using particular fandoms, such as *My Little Pony*, as a way to promote Christian doctrine (Crome 2014).

Many scholars have referred to travel to these power spot sites by fans as a form of pilgrimage (King 1993; Alderman 2002; Gammon 2004; Porter 2004; Brooker 2005, 2007; McCarron 2006; Margry 2008; Williams 2012; Norris 2013; Andrews 2014; Larsen 2015; Okamoto 2015; Erdely & Breede 2017; Geraghty 2018). Many fans also refer to their travel to these places as “pilgrimages” (Porter 2004; Zubernis & Larsen 2018). This use of the term “pilgrimage” to describe visits to places fans find important or meaningful follows Morinis’ (1992) view that any journey “undertaken by a person in quest of a place or a state that he or she believes to embody a *valued ideal*”(4; emphasis added). Indeed, the continued secularization of society has led to the decline of the symbolic, mystical, and religious qualities of pilgrimage (Cohen 1992a; Margry 2014; Olsen 2019), which qualities have been co-opted by secular journeys of discovery. As such, the term pilgrimage” is used to frame how fans, as “pilgrim-tourists” (Cohen 1992a), view their travel to sites related to their preferred fandom—to “center[s] out there” (Turner 1973; Cohen 1992b) or a person’s sociocultural center—and as a way of “making meaning and establishing identity” (Zubernis & Larsen 2018: 145) and finding their “multiple selves” (Erdely & Breede 2017: 43). At many of these sites, fans take pictures of themselves in “religious-looking poses” and then post these pictures to social media. In doing so, they both sacralize and reinforce the sacred nature of these sites (Jang 2020a: 119).

Liminality and communitas

Another way in which fandom and religion are related is their relation to what Van Gennep (1960) called “liminality” and Turner (1969) termed “communitas”. Liminality refers to the temporary, transitional, and immersive state that people enter while traveling to or during their time at sacred sites. During this transitional state, a person is “in-between situations and conditions where established structures are dis-located, hierarchies reversed, and traditional settings of authority possibly endangered” (Mälksoo 2012: 481). This liminal, “betwixt and

between” state is thought to lead to “a reconstruction of identity (in which the sense of self is significantly disrupted) in such a way that the new identity is meaningful for the individual and their community” (Beech 2011: 287). As Turner and Turner (1978: 3) suggested, liminality is “not only [about] transition but also potentiality, not only ‘going to be’ but also ‘what may be’”. This temporary, transitional, and immersive state has been compared to a “third space” (Bhabha 1994; Soja 1996), where “people’s religious identities can be reflexively remade through the encounter and interaction with both the physical and the meta-physical aspects of [sacred] site[s]” (Olsen 2012a: 233; see Collins-Kreiner 2010).

Communitas refers to the bonds that pilgrims form with each other when like-minded people are in physical proximity to each other in a liminal space (Turner 1969; Wu et al. 2020). For Turner (1969), these bonds take place because pilgrimage transcends ordinary socioeconomic structures (i.e., anti-structure), and through worship and ritual performances people find commonalities that make them a part of the same socioreligious community (Turner & Turner 1978). According to Turner, there are three types of communitas: “spontaneous” (i.e., where communitas spontaneously happens), “normative” (i.e., where space and experience are structured in such a way to foster and maintain communitas), or “ideological” (i.e., the ideological and utopian tenets that drive normative communitas) (Di Giovine 2011; Higgins & Hamilton 2020). Cox (2018) discusses another type of communitas—“tangible communitas”, which refers to imagined communities that coalesce around tangible items or material culture. While all these forms of communitas do not mean that tension or contestation within or between groups at sacred sites are non-existent (Eade & Sallnow 1991; Coleman & Elsner 1995), communitas as a concept is merely meant to describe how people from different backgrounds can come together, feel a sense of togetherness, and form a cohesive group. At the same time, Collins and Murphy (2014), following Carse (1986, 2008), expand upon communitas to distinguish between “civitas” (producers) and “communitas” (community of consumers) to understand the relationships between churches and their adherents and, in this case, fandoms and their fans.

Both liminality and communitas have been discussed briefly within fandom studies, particularly in the context of conventions. Both multi-fandom and single fandom conventions are opportunities for fans to enter into a liminal space—a “temporary space with different norms for behavior and self-expression”—with like-minded “believers” to connect with objects and become a part of a community of veneration (Zubernis & Larsen 2018: 148). As Zubernis and Larsen (2018: 147) argue, “Conventions can be viewed as liminal spaces in the sense that they take place on the border between fans and fannish objects”—which “space is not used to bring the real and fictional world together, but to bridge the gap between the fan and the object of fandom”. As such, convention space “is often a transitional space where fans experiment with and perform their identities....a transitional space where a temporary transgression of gender, sexual, racial, and ethnic norms is allowed and where boundaries between the self and the world are negotiated and reconstructed” (p. 149). In other words, a “third space”.

In terms of communitas, while conventions are generally spaces of “communal celebration”, Zubernis and Larsen (2018: 152) note that “While fan pilgrimage often replicates many of the dynamics of conventions such as ritual, performance, and entrance into a liminal space, it is often a solitary undertaking. Where conventions are spaces of communal celebration, pilgrimage sites are often places for quiet reflection and solitary communing”. At the same time, entering the liminal space of conventions allows individuals to participate in “the communal experience of meeting fellow enthusiasts”, which can strengthen their fandom. This in turn leads to a better understanding of “how collective experience can add to the self-defined

notion of the fans as a family” (Phillips 2011: 478). For many fans, one way in which *communitas* occurs is through cosplay, in which fans “transgress the boundary between the real world and the fictional world and find pleasure in straddling these two worlds to explore aspects of identity” (Zubernis & Larsen 2018: 149). Outside of fan conventions, Guschwan (2011: 1996) suggests that *communitas* is achieved for football fans in Europe when they “momentarily comes together as one” through singing team football songs or cheering for their team in unison. At the same time, because for most fans engagement with the text or object of their fandom is solitary, “[t]he feeling of connection is not [actually] with other fans, but with the fiction” (Brooker 2007: 159). As such, “there are times when the presence of others actually detracts from and impedes full immersion”, such as when die-hard fans interact with casual fans, which may cause a disconnect between convention attendees, inhibiting the prospects for true *communitas* to occur (Zubernis & Larsen 2018: 153).

Ritual/performance

While the written and spoken word is used to express theological approaches toward the faith, belief, and values of a religion, rituals and performances are also important forms of religious expression. Rituals are special social events that take place in special places that have been “bracketed off” from the ordinary world (Cavicchi 1998: 89; Beeman 2015: 40). While the ordinary world represents the “way things are”, rituals, according to Smith (1980: 125), idealize the “way things ought to be”. As Smith explained, “Ritual is a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that this ritualised perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things” (*ibid*). Rituals generally involve the use and/or manipulation of material objects and sacred embodied actions, whether through bowing, hand gestures, or other forms of bodily movement. While Smith believed that ritual by definition was “sacral” and therefore in the domain of religion, Grimes (1999: 269) argued that “not all ritual is religious”, and that “sacred reenactment is a subcategory of ritual”. As such, what is considered ritualistic is, much like pilgrimage, determined by the people who label certain actions as such.

According to Dionísio, Leal, and Moutinho (2008: 23), “Fandom experience is expressed through a formal series of public and private rituals requiring a symbolic language and space deemed sacred by its worshippers”. For example, cosplayers who dress up as their favorite character perform the ritual of “striking a particular pose on stage that typifies that character” (Buljan 2016: 104). Another form of ritual at conventions is standing in line to wait for an encounter with actors who either voice or play characters within different fandoms—a form of “celebrity worship” (Zubernis & Larsen 2018: 155). Another ritual in which many fans participate is inscribing their names in the form of graffiti at fandom sites, such as Beatles fans writing their names outside of Abbey Road Studios or fans of the TV series *Sherlock* doing the same outside of St. Bartholomew’s Hospital. In doing so, “It allows the fan to leave a bit of herself in the fictional world. . . . It also allows fans to connect to the real-world objects of fandom via the performance itself” (Zubernis & Larsen 2018: 153–154). Jang (2020a, 2020b) also gives the example of fans of *Love Live! School Idol Project*—a multimedia project revolving around a fictional story about a group of high school girls who start an idol group—engaging in several religious-like or ritualistic behaviors. For example, “armament”, as a form of cosplay, refers to “the act of wearing a large and often chaotic array of *Love Live!* merchandise, such as badges and soft toys, when fans [travel]” (Jang 2020a: 121). Another ritualistic behavior within this fan group is “kowtowing” (i.e., kneeling and bowing very low) to *Love Live!* advertising. A further behavior is referred to as “birthday pilgrimage”, where fans

climb Mount Umi in South Korea on March 15 because one of the characters of *Love Live!* is named Umi and her birthday is on that date. At the top of Mount Umi, fans have created an altar where they leave “offerings”, such as stuffed toys and Umi-related merchandise, and then “kowtow” to the altar before returning home.

Affective experiences

Liminality, communitas, and ritual/performance can lead to fans having affective experiences (Zubernis & Larsen 2018). The idea of “affect” is not an easily understood concept, being poorly defined in the academic literature. At a very basic level, affect can be defined as a person’s “ability to affect or be affected” in some way (Massumi 2015: 48). From a psychological and neurological perspective, affect refers to the ways in which people react to objects or situations they encounter (Duncan & Barrett 2007). Affect, however, is considered as separate from moods or emotions, in that affect is “a background state that continually changes in response to a host of events, most beyond conscious monitoring” (Russell 2015: 196). In the same way that a person feels their body temperature rising or falling prior to cognitively determining whether they are “hot” or “cold” or making any determination why they are feeling this way (Russell 2003: 148), affect is a neurophysiological “non-reflective” state that determines the intrinsic pleasure or displeasure (i.e., hedonic valence) and interest or lack of interest (i.e., arousal or activation) a person has toward an object or situation. The status of these two psychological properties at any given time informs the precognitive attitudes and feelings a person has toward an object or situation. Affect also determines how the brain “privileges incoming information based on one’s history of experience of what is motivationally relevant in a given context, thereby generating a predisposition to attend to certain categories of stimuli over others” (Todd et al. 2012: 367). As Pykett (2018: 161) puts, “human action precedes cognition; put simply, we act before we think”.

While much of the research on affect has been in the realm of neuroscience and psychology, geographers have also examined affective or emotional geographies as part of “neural”, “bio-social”, and “affective” turns in the discipline (Pykett 2018). Affective or emotional geographies involve understanding how people produce geographical knowledge and experience life through embodied, sensuous, and “energetic outcome[s] of encounters between bodies in particular places” (Conradson & Latham 2007: 232). For Conradson and Latham (2007: 232, emphasis added), “Affect...emerges through engagement and interaction: it is an outcome of *emplaced* encounters. Human emotions then reflect our recognition and perceptions of affective states”. These emplaced encounters can occur either during the “performative practices of everyday life” (Jones 2011: 876) or through travel to places that have special meaning. However, these emplaced encounters are often fixed or framed by economic, political, social, and cultural representations and interpretations of how a space should be experienced and the type of bodily performances that are appropriate for these encounters (Lorimer 2005). For example, religious site managers take care to create an environment or “sense of place” (Shackley 2001) to promote an authentic religious or spiritual atmosphere in order to elicit certain emotional responses, thereby offering affirmations of religious identity while also shifting the identities of tourists to pilgrims (Olsen 2012a, 2012b). As such, much of the work on affective geographies comes from the perspective of “non-representational theories” that go beyond how space is represented and focus on the “pre-cognitive aspects of embodied life” (Simpson 2011: 344).

Zubernis and Larsen (2018: 151, emphasis added) argue that “Fandom, much like religion, involves an intensely *affective experience*”. As noted above, the objects or texts of fandom

are “sites of intense emotional engagement” (*ibid*). In this context, Zubernis and Larsen are using “affect” as being synonymous with “emotion”, which is in line with how many academics understand and utilize affect—to describe experiences and activities that are both meaningful and transformative. From this perspective, Zubernis and Larsen suggest that “it is the tangible physicality of the pilgrimage site that allows fans to immerse themselves in the fictional world” (p. 153). In other words, immersion into a fandom through embodied encounters with its (im)material worlds is what leads to “affective experiences”. These embodied encounters not only take place during travel to and interaction with a site related to a fandom, but also through what Collins (2004) labels as “interaction rituals”, where interactions between, in this case, fans, “generates positive emotional energies” which “lift[s] their spirits and creat[es] social solidarity among them” (Lim 2016: 687). This “positive emotional energy” is also important in the formation of people’s religiosity and spirituality (Saroglou, Buxant & Tilquin 2008). Indeed, “Affective experience serves as an important source of information when people are making global judgments about the quality of their lives” (Joshano 2018: 629). Positive affective experiences also lead many fans to describe their fandom experiences as a “religious” or a “spiritual experience” (Cavicchi 1998; Jang 2020a), which means that their emotional attachments to their fandom have increased in a positive matter. This can potentially create “affective shifts” to both cognitive and pre-cognitive processes which affect both a person’s unconscious and personality (Hill & Hood 1999: 1016) and more fundamentally how they “act before they think” (Pykett 2018: 161).

Politicization

Any type of movement can be utilized for political purposes. This has long been the case with religion, which is often used to justify nationalistic movements and terrorist ideologies and to politically argue for or against certain social issues (Stump 2000; Brubaker 2012; Bloomer, Pierson & Claudio 2019). In many cases, fringe elements of a faith community can distort religious beliefs, leading to an extreme religious fanaticism or radicalism that advocates for political action, and in some cases violence, to promote a certain religious ideology, reclaim religious homelands, or to fight against globalizing influences within a religious society (Kundnani 2012). Religious pilgrimage can also be viewed through a political lens, where different religious groups or differences within one religious group can lead to contestation over the ownership, management, representation, and interpretation of religious sites (Olsen 2017). Pilgrimage can also have strong religious undertones, such as American “Zionist tourism” to Israel by evangelical Christians to express support and solidarity with the state of Israel (Belhassen 2009; Belhassen & Ebel 2009; Ron & Timothy 2019).

Fandoms are also occasionally utilized for political or activist purposes. According to Jenkins (2014: 65), “fan activism” refers to “forms of civic engagement and political participation that emerge from within fan culture itself”. In many cases, fan activism consists of lobbying for fan-related outcomes (Brough & Shresthova 2012), such as engaging in complex campaigns to either protest the cancellation of TV shows, as in the case of *Star Trek* in the 1960s, or to show support for a potential film project (Jenkins 2015). In other cases, fan activism revolves around attempts to have more say in the development of fan content, such as the inclusion of sexual and racial minorities, to resist forms of censorship copyright infringements, and pushing back against the sexualization of women (Jenkins 2015, 2018). Even though most forms of activism are oriented toward nonpolitical ends (Earl & Kimport 2009), van Zoonen (2005: 63) notes that these fandom efforts at activist engagement and organization involve “customs that have been laid out as essential for democratic politics:

information, discussion, and activism”. As such, “fandom may represent a particularly powerful training ground for future activists and community organizers” (Jenkins 2015: 211). However, there are other forms of fan activism that aim to make a political or social difference. One example is the Harry Potter Alliance, a US-based non-profit organization that advocates for social justice issues, such as fair trade and marriage equality because that is what Harry and Dumbledore would do (Brough & Shresthova 2012; Jenkins 2015). Many celebrities also seek to utilize their fans to promote activist and philanthropic causes, such as Lady Gaga, who uses social media to encourage her fans to contribute to and actively petition for change regarding social causes such as gay rights, HIV/AIDS awareness, youth homeless shelters, and disaster relief (Bennett 2014).

Fandom as religion

As noted earlier, the idea of “fandom as religion” refers to how some fandoms can become quasi-religious in nature, and in some cases lead to the development of “invented religion[s]” (Cusack 2013; Taira 2013; Lužný 2020) or “fiction-based religion[s]” (Davidsen 2013; Cusack & Kosnáč 2016). For many fandoms, religion serves as a template for fan practice, with “the discourse of religious conversion...provid[ing] fans with a model for...describing the experience of becoming a fan” (Cavicchi 1998: 51; see Hills 2002) and the development of individual and group identity and meaning. Many fandoms revolve around what Davidsen (2013: 378–379) calls “speculative fiction”—where authors and producers take motifs or aspects of magic, pagan mythologies, science fiction, and the “dark side of the supernatural” and “disperses these ideas to a wide audience and enhance...their plausibility by inviting people to identify with protagonists who inhabit worlds in which the supernatural is notoriously real, and by investing the alternative supernatural with symbolic capital”.

There are several examples of fandoms tied to a fiction-based religion. For example, Jindra (1994) argues that some aspects of *Star Trek* fandom are similar to religious movements, including the sacralization of certain aspects of modern culture, engagement in ritualized practices, and the development of a “canon” and a particular hierarchy within *Star Trek* fandom groups—all of which adds to the “alternative universe” of *Star Trek*. As McLaren and Porter (1999) note, many “Trekkies” combine different aspects of new age spirituality in part because the ties between science and spirituality are explored by various characters in the *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, and *Star Trek: Voyager* series. Another example is “Snapeism”, which comes from the Harry Potter fandom. “Snapeism” involves women who believe that one of the main characters, Snape, “exists as a being with thoughts and feelings independent of [the] author”. Because Snape exists on an astral plane, he can be channeled, particularly by women, to help them in their daily lives (Alderton 2014: 221). Jediism is another fandom that has been compared to a quasi-religion. Based on the *Star Wars* franchise, fans that follow Jediism identify as Jedi knights and “really” believe that the “Force” is real, even though the franchise does not constitute real history (Possamai 2012; Davidsen 2013; Taira 2013). As Williams, Miller and Kitchen (2017: 119) note, these Jedi “take inspiration from the ideas and ideals of the fiction and its source materials to create a pragmatically spiritual way of life”, based in part on Zen Buddhism (Bainbridge 2017), and live as a Jedi Knight “always and everywhere” (Davidsen 2016, 2017: 8). Davidsen (2013: 391) explains how Jediism has succeeded in becoming a quasi-religion where other fandoms have failed:

It seems that fictional narratives can be used as authoritative texts for religion if they
(a) tell of superhuman agents or powers that are real within the fictional universe, but

supernatural from the perspective of the reader/viewer and if (b) these agents and powers are not obvious analogical references to one particular existing religion...It furthermore seems to boost the religious potential of fiction when it includes (c) an explicit and institutionalised 'narrative religion' (such as the Force religion of the Jedi Knights in Star Wars) whose (d) main ideas are presented by an authoritative teacher figure to a 'disciple' with whom the reader/viewer is invited to identify.

The use of fandoms as substitutes for religion is a vestige of the broader processes of secularization, which refers to "the process whereby sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious instructions and symbols" (Berger 1967: 107). Rooted in early capitalism, this "secularization thesis" posited that religion would play a lesser role in the public sphere and in the daily lives of individuals and eventually disappear. While secularization has manifested itself at a more geographically limited scale than originally predicted, the weakening of religion in many modern societies and the rise of consumerism as a "social structuring vector" or logic has led to the development of consumer-based forms of spirituality (Gauthier et al. 2013), displacing religious authorities as the creators and containers of meaning and identity. This is because of the move toward "cultural deregulation" in consumer societies (Beyer 2007), which deregulation has led to individuals being "less institutionally bound and more personalized manifestations of religion that also offer access to transcendental human concerns" (Olsen 2019: 273). This may also explain in part why fandoms and their accompanying consumeristic logics are replacing religious symbols and institutions as transmitters of tradition and identity, acting as secular religious outlets for individuals who seek personal meaning and symbols outside of the realm of religion that fit their personalities and interests.

These examples of fan-based religions, however, raise questions regarding the validity and seriousness with which scholars should take these religions. As Jindra (1994) observed, these fandoms do not fit the conventional definition of religion with its belief in deity and the supernatural. For many people, "Fandom is an aspect of how [fans] make sense of the world, in relation to mass media, and in relation to [their] historical, social, [and] cultural location" (Jenson (1992: 27), which includes implicitly combining religion and spirituality within fandoms. As noted above, there are several commonalities between these fandoms and religion, even if only on a structural level. However, several scholars have questioned whether comparisons to religion and fandom are valid. As Porter (2009: 271) notes, many scholars tend to "pathologize the implicit religious dimensions" of fandom. In some cases, scholars view these fiction-based religions as a form of fanaticism. Fuschillo (2020: 357) defines fanaticism as "an intense emotional commitment toward a set of values and takes place as an individual process and/or a collective movement". As Kelly (2004: 1) suggests, "To many nonfans, especially among the professional and upper middle classes, [fans] are either the "obsessed individuals" or the 'hysterical crowd'", and as Alderton (2014: 220) notes, many fiction-based religions, such as Snapeism, are "usually interpreted as a ludicrous—and therefore invalid—religion". As such, the intersections between pop culture, pilgrimage, and spirituality should really fall under "secular pilgrimage" or "secular" or "civil" religion, in part because the object of travel is not religious per se—at least not in the historical and etymological understandings of religion and what constitutes a pilgrimage (Bickerdike 2016).

At the same time, Davidsen (2013) suggests that most fiction-based religions recognize that their "faith" is couched in an alternate world—a simulacrum of religion (Possamai 2012)—as compared to traditional or "history-based" religions that are founded on divine revelation (e.g., Judaism, Islam, Christianity) (Cusack 2010). As Porter (2009: 271) notes,

“Star Trek conventions are “like” pilgrimage[.]...the [National Hockey League] is “like” an ecclesia[, and]...Elvis is ‘like’ a saint”. As noted above, Sherlockians who inscribe their names outside of St. Bartholomew’s Hospital “require...a *performance of the belief* in the fictional world of Sherlock (as opposed to an actual belief in that world). It also allows fans to connect to the real-world objects of fandom via the performance itself” (Zubernis & Larsen 2018: 153–154, italics in original). This follows Falque’s (2016: 88, emphasis in original) view that

If a belief is a mental state and this state means recognizing that a certain representation is true, we could certainly doubt the adequation of the representation to the thing (“I believe *that* the sky is blue”), but not the *belief in the representation* (“I believe *in* the blue sky”)—in particular when we entrust ourselves to beings that are dear to us, albeit imaginary (“I believe in Santa Claus”).

As such, as noted above, for many fans, religion serves as a template for fan practice—at least regarding the use of religiously-oriented terminology to describe how one “answers spiritual needs in an age when established religions have lost their relevance” (Duffett 2003: 519). While some critics of “fandom as religion” suggest that “religion requires a degree of faith that fandom does not...fandom delivers a kind of individualistic satisfaction that religion discourages” (Cusack & Robertson 2019: 3). At the same time, as Doss (1999: 75) notes, Elvis fans do not necessarily consider their visits and actions at Graceland as pilgrimage or ritual. They also do not consider their actions as elevating Elvis to a “cult religious figure”. Doss suggests that this is a confusing admission for scholars who examine fandom through the lens of religion. As such, it is the outside scholar that more often than not that imposes the use of religious terminology to describe the travel and actions of fans. As such, both fans and scholars of fandom at times use religion as a frame-of-reference to understand better both the structure and the experience of fans and their fandoms.

At the heart of approaching fiction-based religions from this perspective are questions related to “authenticity”, which “is used to undermine and devalue the ‘sacred’ spaces that fans create for themselves” (Porter 2009: 273). Doing so, however, “diminishes the fan and trivializes the object of fandom” (Zubernis & Larsen 2018: 154). For many fans, fandom acts as a secular substitution for religion, in the same way that dark tourism is considered by some a substitute for religious pilgrimage in a post-modern world (Korstanje & Olsen 2020). As Adler (1992: 408) suggests, present-day travel is intimately tied to the “world and self-construction”, and that travel itself can be considered a form of “religious ritual and quest”. As Buljan (2016: 101) argues, “One of the primary human activities is to seek, find and construct meaning”. Indeed, many fans believe that the objects of their fandom can offer both “an emotive outlet for those in search of a secure identity” and an avenue for them to “express their identity, affiliation, and how they chose to be seen by others” (King 2010: 1). If “religion and spirituality are understood as a search for or experience of the sacred, as defined by the individual”, then “what is sacred is what the individual finds to be sacred in that he or she attributes qualities to the object that are sacred-like” (Hill & Hood 1999: 1019).

Conclusion

While scholars have historically criticized popular culture and fandoms, there has been an increasing academic interest in the organization of fandoms and their relationship to religion and spirituality in the past two decades. This is in part because fandoms are one way in which people seek to create meaning in their lives, particularly with the seeming decline of

religion in a secularizing world. As Knoblauch (2008) argues, postmodern culture dissolves the boundaries between the religious and the non-religious, the sacred and secular divide, and the boundaries between the private and the public. As such, what constitutes religion, the sacred, and transcendence has become negotiable. This is the case with popular culture and its many fandoms, many of which can be seen as modern forms of popular religion. Indeed, in a time when people are becoming disenchanted by religion, popular culture seems to be a key reenchanting factor, particularly in the context of the search for meaning.

The purpose of this chapter was to summarize part of the rapidly growing literature on the intersections between popular culture, religion, and spirituality. This was done by examining both “religion as fandom” and “fandom as religion”. Indeed, there are structural similarities between religion and fandom, whether based on the shared ideas of sacred space, liminality and *communitas*, ritual and performance, affective experiences, and politicization. As noted in this chapter, there are also instances where fandoms take on a quasi-religion function in the lives of fans that brings meaning to their lives outside of the realm of institutionalized religion. While there is much work to be done parsing out additional intersections between popular culture, religion, and spirituality, one fruitful area might be in the realm of fan experiences. While there has been work done on fan experiences (Karpovich 2008; Porat 2010; Phillips 2011; Lee 2015), unfortunately, there has been no work done in the area of affect and fandom from an affective-cognitive perspective. This might prove a fruitful field of research for better understanding how experience and emotion a person has regarding their fandom sets the “affective tone of the person’s spiritual life” (Fallot 2001: 113).

Note

- 1 Following the Washinomiya Shine example above, Moy and Phongpanichanan (2018: 217) highlight several examples of TV and film locations that saw a large growth in visitor numbers after these TV dramas and films were released. Some examples include the Wallace Monument in Scotland, which saw a 300% increase in visitors a year after the release of *Braveheart*; Lyme Park in Cheshire, UK, which saw a 150% increase in visitors after the release of *Pride and Prejudice*; and Southfork Ranch in Dallas, USA, saw a 500,000 increase in visitors after the TV serial *Dallas* became popular.

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