Fiction-based religion

Practical information

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Context: Alternative spirituality and popular culture

It is widely acknowledged among scholars of religion that alternative spirituality and popular culture mutually influence each other (e.g., Partridge 2004, 2005).

Alternative spirituality provides ideas (e.g., reincarnation, UFOs, Mayan prophecies), beings (e.g., vampires, angels) and elements (e.g., healing crystals, pentagrams) as plot devices for popular cultural texts, e.g., films, TV shows, computer games, song lyrics and paperbacks.

Popular culture in turn constructs ‘fictional religions’, i.e. fictional magical, spiritual and religious beliefs and practices, and these fictional religions can be turned into lived practice by consumers of popular culture. Lived fictional religions are sometimes termed ‘hyper-real religions’ (Possamai 2005, 2010) but I prefer the more neutral term ‘fictional-based religions’.

In some instances fiction-based religions become institutionalised. Scientology, Satanism, The Church of All Worlds, the Realian movement and Otherkin are arguably examples of institutionalised fiction-based (or at least fiction-inspired) religions, but to my knowledge only the Otherkin movement has been studied in-depth with its fiction-based characteristic in mind (Kirby 2009). Certainly more research into how fictional religions can undergo the transformation into institutionalised fiction-based religion is needed.

The Otherkin movement is inspired by fantasy, horror and science fiction literature in general, but to my knowledge no studies have been devoted to fiction-based religions based on one specific popular cultural text. My project aims at filling this gap by studying two such movements, one large and one small:

- **Jediism** which is based on George Lucas’ Star Wars films and is comprised of several independent groups
- **Ilsaluntë Valion** which is a small group based on Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings and Silmarillion

Research questions

For my project I have formulated research questions on three levels: on the level of my two case studies, on the intermediate level of fiction-based religions as a category, and on the broader level of contemporary religion in general.

[1]
The level of case studies:
- What are the beliefs and practices of the members of Jedïïsm and Ilïšalïntë Valïon?
- How do the members legitimate their religion given the fact that it is based on fiction?

The level of fiction-based religions as a category:
- What kind of fiction is likely to give rise to a fiction-based religion?
- Which role does the Internet play for the formation of fiction-based religions?

The level of contemporary religion in general:
- Are we here witnessing a profound example of a general trend towards the convergence of religion/spirituality and art/popular culture?
- What kind of religions are best adapted to the Internet, and is Internet-adaptability of importance for the future success of religions?
- If we can answer yes to the two questions above, what will this mean for the power balance between official and un-official religion?

Approach, ethics and methods

Approach: Virtual ethnography
Because members are geographically scattered, the groups under study are primarily active online. My research approach is therefore that of virtual ethnography (Hine 2000, 2008), which has earlier been employed in a similar study of online Paganism by Douglas Cowan (2005).

Virtual ethnography is mainly hermeneutic in that I aim to systematically describe the beliefs and practices of the group as the members experience these. In my analysis of the data, however, I also look for patterns in discourse and practice that the research participants are themselves unaware of or which might differ from their conscious perception (e.g., their negotiation of the stigmatising fact that their religion is fiction-based; patterns of social relations, alliances and discursive power; the degree of inspiration from conventional religions).

Ethics
Due to research focus on religion, small samples and problems with securing anonymity, I do not report sensitive information on race, health, sexuality, education, income and political views, and neither do I try to correlate such social variables with patterns in religious practice and belief beyond a very general level.

All data collection in my project takes place under informed consent. While the names of the groups studied will be published, individuals will be given the choice between anonymity and recognition as copyright-holding authors.

Methods
I use the following methods in the collection and analysis of my material.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Data source</th>
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<tr>
<td>Discussions on homepage forum</td>
<td>Harvest upon informed consent</td>
<td>Quantitative content analysis; qualitative, hermeneutical analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Email discussion lists</td>
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<td>Qualitative, hermeneutical analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hermeneutical interviews</td>
<td>Participant-observation followed up by questions + recordings of older rituals</td>
<td>Qualitative, hermeneutical analysis</td>
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<td>Daily life in the group (forum/lists + individual and group communication via chat and mail)</td>
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<td>Online rituals mediated by skype</td>
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Preliminary results

The level of case study: Jediism

Based on a pilot study of Jediism some preliminary answers can be given to the questions on what Jediists believe and do and how they legitimate Jediism’s fiction-based character. I here present some points.

Jediism is a fiction-based religion based on George Lucas’ Star Wars (SW) movies, and the label Jediism is derived from the name for the order of warrior monks in SW, the so-called Jedi Knights. The Jediists believe that the world is pervaded by a benign and divine power, and that it is more meaningful to talk about this power using terminology from SW rather than from conventional religions. They therefore prefer to name the divine power ‘the Force’ rather than ‘God’ and use the Jedi Code and the doctrine of the light and dark sides of the Force as a hermeneutical tool in their interpretation of existence.

Jediism is also a grassroots religion. The movement has no central leadership but is made up of several independent groups. Because the relatively few members are scattered geographically, meeting and communication primarily takes place on the Internet. Not surprisingly, Jediism is primarily an American phenomenon. But contrary to what one might expect most members are not teenagers in search of an identity, but people in their 20s, 30s and 40s. Jediism is recognised as a religious body in several countries including the United States, Canada and New Zealand.

I will here highlight three main characteristics of Jediism:

a) Distancing from fan culture

Jediists are also fans. They describe the SW movies as “wonderful”, display a detailed knowledge of the SW universe in their online discussions and like to dress up in Jedi robes. Nevertheless it is important for them to distance themselves from the fan culture. Jedi Sanctuary warns visiting SW-fans like this:

Some of you might think that the Jedi Sanctuary is like a SW fan club, or just a joke. It’s not. It’s a real path that we follow, and we take it seriously. When we say, ‘May the Force be with you’, we believe it and mean it.

It is especially the playful and ironic attitude among fans which the Jediists react against. Even though the Jediists can make fun of their own religion, the existence of the Force is not to be questioned.

b) Teachings about the Force

The concept of the Force is central in Jediism and the Force is not seen as a fictional entity. Rather, Jediists view ‘the Force’ as a valid name for the divine power in the real world, or they simply identify the Force with the very divine power behind the god images of the world’s religions.

All Jediist groups display the main features of their Force belief on their homepages. Jedi Sanctuary sums up its theology in the following three points to which all Jediist groups would agree:

1. We believe that the Force is an all pervading Universal Energy that binds together, and maintains everything in existence.
2. We believe that the Natural Order of the universe comes from the Force.
3. We believe that the Force is, and probably always will be, a mystery

Even though all Jediists believe in the Force, they disagree about how to understand it. Within the SW universe the Force is seen as an un-personified, supernatural power or providence, and most Jediists view the Force in this way. As shown in the figure below however, some Jediists move beyond SW and see the Force either as an entirely natural energy or as a divine person who can answer
prayers. These differences in Force theology correlate with differences in values and ritual practice. Three ideal types of Jediist groups can thus be identified.

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<th>Three ideal types of Jediism</th>
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c) Jediism and the other religions
A key move in Jediists’ strategy for legitimating their religion is their argumentation for SW’s validity as myth. Lucas himself uses the term ‘myth’ regularly about his movies, but more importantly for Jediists, the American mythologist and New Age-icon Joseph Campbell once said that Star Wars was a myth – in an interview taking place on Lucas’ Skywalker Range.

Some disagreement persists, however, among Jediists on how the relationship between SW, Jediism and the conventional religions should be understood. There are basically two views.
The view adopted by purist Jediists is that SW is a perfectly valid myth, and that there is no difference between the religion of the Jedi Knights in SW and Jediism as lived-out religion in the real world. However, since SW does not provide as elaborate a catalogue of practices and beliefs as most other religions, these Jediists typically combine Jediism with the membership of another religious group, for instance a Christian church or a Wiccan coven. The purist Jediists thus engage in different religious traditions in their own right, but try not to mix them with each other.

Other Jediists make a virtue out of mixing elements from conventional religions with SW material and fundamentally understand Jediism as a syncretistic religion which combines the best from the world’s religions under the terminology (‘Force’ and ‘Jedi’) from SW. The Temple of the Jedi Order explains it like this:

Jediism is an interfaith initiative and a syncretistic religion – a faith involving elements from two or more religions including Taoism, Shintoism, Buddhism, Christianity, Mysticism, and many other Religions’ universal truths, a combination of martial arts and the Code of Chivalry.

Fictional Jedi masters are recognized on equal terms with founders, prophets and ‘masters’ from conventional religions and esoteric traditions as sources to theological insight in the Force. It is not uncommon to see references to Master Yoda and Master Luther in the same forum post. For these syncretistic Jediists Jediism is seen as a real religion because it combines elements from other real religions while SW is seen merely as a fictional parable.
The level of fiction-based religion

The fictional worlds that give rise to fiction-based religions

It seems that fictional worlds with the following four characteristics have a great chance of giving rise to a fiction-based religion:

- FW includes a fictional religion (preferably institutionalised, positively portrayed and offering adult, supernormal role models)
- FW has a large fan community (critical mass)
- Detailed FW (narrative effect of reality)
- Author speaks about the work as a ‘myth’ (legitimisation; blurring border between fiction and religion)

The role of media

Some interesting media effects can be observed:

- Jediism began as a religious movement around 1995/6 exactly as the introduction of mass Internet in the United States made it possible for Jediists to find each other and organise.
- The first group of Tolkien-based spirituality was formed in 2005 following the highly successful film adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003). Some members of *Ilsaluntë Valion* first encountered Tolkien’s works through the movies suggesting that the film adaptation created critical mass for the movement.

References


Fiction-based religion
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Context
Alternative spirituality and popular culture mutually influence each other. An extreme case of this dynamic is the rise of alternative religious movements based on fiction, so-called ‘fiction-based religions’ or ‘hyper-real religions’.

So far only one major study has been conducted on fiction-based religions, namely Daniel Kirby’s research on the Otherkin movement whose members, inspired by the fantasy genre, believe to be non-humans (e.g., elves, dragons, and vampires).

More research is needed, especially on groups that contrary to the Otherkin base themselves on one specific popular cultural text. My PhD project is an attempt to close this gap by carrying out in-depth research of two new religions based on particular popular cultural texts. The two fiction-based religions are:

- **Jedism** which is based on *Star Wars* and comprised of several independent groups
- **Ilsaluntë Valion?** which is a small group based on *The Lord of the Rings*

Research Questions
On the level of case studies I pose the following questions:

- What are the beliefs and practices of the members of Jedism and Ilsaluntë Valion?
- How do the members legitimate their religions given the fact that their religion is based on fiction?

On the level of fiction-based religions as a category I will be asking:

- What kind of fictional world is likely to give rise to a fiction-based religion?
- Which role does the Internet play in the formation of fiction-based religions?

Approach and methods
My approach is that of ‘virtual ethnography’. Contrary to earlier studies in online social life which have used ‘virtual ethnography’ ro refer to non-reactive data harvesting (‘lurking’), I combine this method with interviewing (using chat and email) and participant-observation (e.g., in skype-mediated rituals; as occasional discussion participant on fora).

My approach is mainly ‘hermeneutic’ in that I aim to systematically describe the beliefs and practices of the group as they see them themselves. In my analysis of the data, however, I also look for patterns in discourse and practice that the research participants are themselves unaware of or that might differ from their conscious perception.

Preliminary results

Case 1: Jedism (based on pilot study)

Jedism’s beliefs and practices
The label ‘Jedism’ is derived from the name for the order of warrior monks in Star Wars (SW), the so-called Jedi Knights. The Jedism movement is made up of several independent groups and has no central leadership. Because the relatively few members are scattered geographically, meeting and communication primarily takes place on the Internet.

Not surprisingly, Jedism is primarily an American phenomenon. But contrary to what one might expect, most members are not teenagers, but people in their 20s, 30s and 40s. Jedism is recognised as a religious body in several countries including the United States, Canada and New Zealand.

The Jedists’ most central characteristic is their belief in the Force, the divine power in SW. Contrary to fans, Jedists do not consider the Force to be a fictional entity, but believe that the Force exists in the real world.

Even though all Jedists believe in the Force, they disagree about how to understand it. Within the SW universe the Force is seen as an unpersonified, supernatural power or providence, and most Jedists view the Force in this way. As shown on the figure below however, some Jedists move beyond SW and see the Force either as an entirely natural energy or as a divine person who can answer prayers. These differences in Force theology correlate with differences in values and ritual practice.

Legitimating Jedism
The American mythologist and New Age-icon Joseph Campbell has in an interview said that SW has mythological qualities. Jedists use this statement to argue that SW is a valid myth and Jedism therefore a religion.

However, since SW does not provide as elaborate a catalogue of practices and beliefs as most other religions, Jedists typically combine Jedism with elements of other religions. The spiritual Jedists tend to combine Jedism with the membership of another religious group, for instance a Christian church or a Wiccan coven. Hyphenated identities as Muslim-Jediisti or Jediist-Pagan are common in this group.

Religious Jedists instead mix elements from conventional religions with SW material and fundamentally understand Jedism as a syncretic religion which combines the best from the world’s religions under the terminology from SW (‘Force’ and ‘Jedi’). According to these syncretic Jediisti, Jedism is legitimised by its connection to the conventional religions, while SW is often seen merely as a fictional parable.