Book Review

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Markus Altena Davidsen, ed., *Narrative and Belief: The Religious Affordance of Supernatural Fiction*. London and New York: Routledge, 2018. xi + 126 pp. ISBN: 978-1-138-55966-0. £120.00.

The relevance of fiction has become a hot topic in the study of religion.[1] A special place in these debates belongs to the investigation of how fiction transforms into religion, or in other words, how and why a text of fiction affords to be read as a religious text. In order to scrutinize the methodology for analysing these "fiction-based,"[2] "invented,"[3] or "hyper-real" religions,[4] Markus Davidsen invited scholars in his field to a symposium at the University of Leiden in 2014. Two questions guided their research: "1) Can a distinction be drawn at all between religious narratives and supernatural fiction? 2) Can we determine which textual features it takes for a fictional narrative to afford religious use?" (2f).

Five different perspectives, by Carole Cusack, Markus Davidsen, Laura Feldt, Dirk Johannsen, and Anders Petersen, were published in the special volume "Thematic Issue on Religion and Fiction" of *Religion* in 2016, edited and introduced by Davidsen. Recently, Routledge republished these articles under the title *Narrative and Belief: Religious Affordance of Supernatural Fiction* in a high-quality hardcover edition. Compact in its 126 pages, the reader encounters five high-level reflections, which together spearhead a discussion on the intricate relations between factual, fictional, and religious realities, and thereby open new frontiers in historical, cognitive, and narratological domains. Davidsen's introductory

1. See for example: *Aries* 7, no.1 (January 2007), special Issue "Esotericism and Fiction: The Horror of Disenchantment"; Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, Vol. 1 (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 119–41, Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 30ff.

2. Markus Altena Davidsen, *The Spiritual Tolkien Milieu* (Doctoral thesis, Leiden University, 2014), 47ff.

3. Carole Cusack, *Invented Religion: Imagination, Fiction, and Faith* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

4. Adam Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyperreal-Testament* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2005).

and editorial work provides helpful access to the articles. It becomes thereby quickly apparent that there is not one single answer or argument presented in the book, but a variety of innovative and sometimes contradictory solutions and approaches that all have to be judged on their own merit.

Davidsen argues in his contribution, "The Religious Affordance of Fiction: Towards a Catalogue of Veracity Mechanisms in Supernatural Narratives," that fictional narratives afford a religious reading by essentially imitating the rhetorical strategy of religious narratives to present supernatural agents as real beings and potential interactive partners (41). In order to find out how an "aura of factuality" is constructed around these agents, Davidsen identifies 10 "veracity mechanisms," and differentiates them into two types: 1) "evidence-mechanisms" that assure the reality of supernatural agents in the story world, and 2) "anchor-mechanisms" that imply that the story world speaks about the actual world (52).

In his introductory article, "Fiction and Religion: How Narratives about the Supernatural Inspire Religious Belief – Introducing the Thematic Issue," Davidsen sets out the main arguments of his contributors and evaluates them in the context of his own findings. As an answer to the first of the initial questions, whether an analytical distinction can be drawn between a text of fiction and a text of religion, Davidsen declares a "stalemate" in the argument. He then refracts the problem by historicising that split and opts for differentiating between our contemporary situation in the "Western world," in which a fiction/religion distinction is "culturally entrenched," and other times and places, in which it is not applicable (6). If we also consider other discussions about the ambiguity of the religion/fiction split, this step in Davidsen's argument should be strongly emphasised as it hopefully opens the discussion further for more historical studies on the transitions between "facts," "fiction," and "religion."[5]

5. See Marco Frenschkowski, "Der Begriff des Phantastischen – Literaturgeschichtliche Betrachtungen," in *Phantasmen: Robert N. Bloch zum Sechzigsten*, ed. Marco Frenschkowski (Gießen: Lindenstruth 2010), 110–34. Antoine Faivre also discusses the relationship between religion and fiction in "Occultism," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., Lindsey Jones (Farnington: Thomson Gale, 2005), 6780–83.

Davidsen responds to the second question—which textual features of a fictional narrative afford religious use—with a system of "three levels of affordance." The contributors found various textual features and mechanisms that 1) offer "cosmological belief" (i.e. belief in supernatural agents without belief in the actuality of the story), 2) inspire religious practice, and 3) offer belief in the actual historicity of the story. Mechanisms that afford historical belief are more powerful and enhance the effect of the lower levels of affordance as well (7). This structure, while only briefly outlined, seems to be so innovative and valuable for his general argument that a clearer presentation in the form of a figure or graph would have been helpful.

Johannsen's article, "On Elves and Freethinkers: Criticism of Religion and the Emergence of the Literary Fantastic in Nordic Literature," offers erudite insights about the relations between religion and fiction from a historical perspective. Johannsen illustrates how a lasting affinity between fiction and religion was established at the beginning of the twentieth century through the academic study of folklore and a Left Hegelian literary circle (118). This circle criticized Romantic storytelling by portraying the social life-world realistically and by portraying "religion" as a conflict-topic that had to be overcome or set in a naturalistic context (108). During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the folktale had been rediscovered as a valuable oral-tradition, which was now dealt with at the same level as religion. Whether a story was classified as religion or poetry became only a question of cultural consolidation (111). In this context, the religiously ambiguous poem cycle *Haugtussa: a story* (1895) by Arne Gaborg (1851–1924) had great impact, not only by explaining religion psychologically, but by leaving it up to the reader to side either with a naturalistic or a supernatural interpretation (115). For Johannsen, this kind of freedom to decide individually what to believe and how to live had a lasting influence on modern religiosity. In Davidsen's systematization, Johannsen thereby provided a convincing analysis to answer the first of the initial questions with a historical approach (6).

In her contribution, "Contemporary Fantasy Fiction and Representations of Religion: Playing with Reality, Myth and Magic in *His Dark Materials* and *Harry Potter*," Feldt argues that both book series form and reflect contemporary religiosity by indicating a general cultural shift towards partial engagements with the "field of religion" (63, 68).[6] In this shift, fantastic narratives increasingly become important to mediate and explore sensations, beings, or powers that traditionally belong to that "field," according to Feldt (66). Hence, fantastic narratives should be included as source material by scholars of religion. In that shift away from an understanding of "religion" as merely "belief," practical interpretation of narratives is the decisive criterion to be taken up religiously, rather than the veracity mechanisms as described by Davidsen (67). Feldt's argument enables Davidsen to classify her analysis as providing an example of Level 1: religious affordances that facilitate "cosmological" belief (7).

In "Fiction into Religion: Imagination, Other Worlds, and Play in the Formation of Community," Cusack thematises the importance of narratives as a basic building block for identity, and as a crucial part in the "cultural product" approach to religion, to enable imaginative participation in other-worlds (88).[7] Basing her argument on Oberon Zell-Ravenheart's "Church of All Worlds," Cusack describes how playful and repeated immersion in the narrative of Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961) spawned a religious community. This happened especially because the values and rituals in the portrayed social milieu were meaningful enough to be repeated in the actual world of the readers (87, 99). Cusack thereby agrees with Davidsen that affordances extend the human need for communion

6. Feldt uses the term "field of religion" in reference to Ingvild S. Gilhus and Lisbeth Mikaelsson (*Kulturens refortrylling: nyreligiøsitet i moderne samfunn* [Oslo: Universitesforlaget, 2005]) "as a field of concentric circles with porous boundaries." Feldt defines its inner circle as institutional religion, while the outer circle consists of a large group with partial and shifting engagement with "religion" (64).
7. Cusack follows Judith Kovach in "The Body as the Ground of Religion, Science, and Self," *Zygon* 37, no. 4 (2002): 941–61, and Maurice Block in "Why Religion is Nothing Special but is Central," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biology Sciences* 363, no. 1499 (2008): 2055–61, and argues that religion "arises" from the structure of the psyche and embodied experience as a cultural product, and is thus one outcome of human participation in explanatory narrative (88).

to religious and fictional figures (90, 99). For Davidsen, Cusack is thus a case in point for affordances of Level 2: mechanisms that afford "ritual use" (8).

In Petersen's article, "The Difference between Religious Narratives and Fictional Literature: a Matter of Degree Only," strong emphasis is put on the relative autonomy of textual features in regard to their later interpretations, and the investigation of these features in reference to models of the evolution of cognition. For Petersen, "religion" and "fiction" are basically interchangeable and underlie the same logic: people are cognitively prone to seek meaning in signs and structure their lives through narratives. Yet, a text is especially prone to be interpreted religiously if the people, places, and times of the story-world refer to the actual world. Counterintuitive abilities of characters enhance this process, especially if these abilities have a benevolent effect and invite readers to mirror themselves in the characters of the story-world (23f). In Davidsen's hierarchy, Petersen's article thus provides material to be included as Level 3: mechanisms that afford historical belief, in the sense that the fictional story-world becomes blended with our actual world.

The strength of each of the contributions makes the collection fruitful beyond its thematic scope. Together they demonstrate the unquestionable relevance of narratives and textual affordances in the study of religion. I am certain that this book deserves a position among the crucial publications in the study of "fiction-based" religions. Davidsen's introductory systematization, and the discussions between the writers within the articles, make it clear that the authors developed their position in awareness of each other. Yet, important questions and the relations between their positions often remain only briefly touched upon or are left open. For instance, if a fictional text also affords religious use due to its emotional value and practicality (98), how does this stand in relation to textual mechanisms that influence the reader due to subtle cognitive mechanisms? Furthermore, tensions seem to remain between approaches that stress the agency of readers who *choose* a text to be taken up religiously (67, 118), and con-

tributors that rather focus on mechanisms that give agency to the text (16, 35). Combined with differing initial understandings of how to categorize "religion" or "fiction," the book can give the impression that the interdisciplinary study of "fiction-based" religions resembles an intricate patchwork of various schools that strongly push in contrasting directions. As a collection of articles that had already appeared in *Religion,* a focus on stronger unifying links between the approaches would have perhaps been useful, instead of evaluation only in context of Davidson's cognitive and textual agency-based model. This leaves it ultimately to the reader's choice with whom to side.

The study of "fiction-based" religions is young and promising, and with this contribution I am sure that it will gain momentum, and spread broader awareness of textual affordances and fictional narratives in the study of religions. This book is recommended for scholars of religion, if only to get an overview and to become aware of the state of the discussion.

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