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Fictional Religions and Religious Fictions: Narratives of Secularisation and Sacralisation at Play

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Introduction

Robert Bellah (b. 1927) in his magisterial *Religion in Human Evolution* (2011) offers an account of the emergence of religion in broadly social constructionist terms, focusing on certain crucial elements, including the phenomenological sociologist Alfred Schutz's notion that humans always inhabit 'multiple realities', sociologist of religion Emile Durkheim's idea of 'collective effervescence' and the 'sacred' as perennial human concerns, developmental psychologist Jerome Bruner's emphasis on the 'self as storyteller', and the complex relationship that play has to all these factors.¹ Play is an example of the multiple realities that human beings straddle; it is a close relative of ritual (and therefore of the sacred, and collective effervescence), and a site of both human sociability and the imagination. In play, people participate in fictional narratives for non-utilitarian reasons. The early theorist of play, Johan Huizinga (1872-1945), emphasized that play is voluntary, creative, and altruistic, tends to foster secrecy and community among the players, is temporary, repetitive, and takes place in 'special' places.² These characteristics inevitably call to mind religion. Huizinga and Bellah are both concerned to locate the origins of religion in the human past. Huizinga's theory is illustrated from the history of the West, ancient to modern (with excursions into anthropological accounts of indigenous peoples); whereas for Bellah, 'history' has expanded to include the vast expanse of time in which humans evolved from primates. This is important as it connects human play with animal play, and emphasizes those evolutionary biological capacities humans developed which constitute the 'tool-kit' that enabled the creation of religion.

This lecture has four parts. The first section considers Bellah's model of human world-construction and world-maintenance, and situates play at the centre of human cultural production. Humans primarily inhabit what Schutz called the 'paramount reality' of daily life, which they accept as natural, putting 'in brackets the doubt the world and its objects might be otherwise than it appears'.³ Play, which features in language, art, myth, ritual and all the other human activities that collectively constitute 'religion', is a crucial to the human experience of what Bellah calls 'unitive events' or 'unitive states', and to the development of modes through which these events are represented and re-created (which Bellah posits

¹ Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 3, 18 and 34.

² Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (London: Paladin, 1971 [1949]), pp. 26-45,

³ Alfred Schutz, 'On Multiple Realities' (1945), in M. A. Natanson and H. L. van Breda (eds), *Collected Papers Volume 1: The Problem of Social Reality* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967), p. 229.

as unitive, enactive, symbolic, and conceptual).⁴ The second part examines the implications of this model for the status of religion(s), phenomena which traditionally claim a supernatural origin or reference point (divine revelation, presence of the spirit world, and so on), and assert their significance, whether for a local group or the whole of humanity, at the highest level of seriousness. Definitions of 'religion' that make reference to the supernatural are contentious in the academic study of religion, but as Mark Chaves has observed, it is certainly the case that 'religious authority claims are distinguished by the fact that their claims are legitimated at least by a language of the supernatural'.⁵ For the purposes of this article, Bellah's adaptation of Durkheim's definition of religion is employed, due to its compatibility with social constructivist accounts of reality, and indeed with all naturalist, non-theological accounts of religious phenomena: '[r]eligion is a system of beliefs and practices relative to the sacred that unite those who adhere to them in a moral community'.⁶

The third section shifts the emphasis to a consideration of the role of narrative in religion, drawing upon Jerome Bruner's notion that story-telling is core to the development of a human self. He argued that, in the case of very young children, stories are comprehensible before any type of abstract reasoning can be grasped. Thus, humans have a 'predisposition to narrative organization' and 'narratives may ... also serve as early interpretants for "logical" propositions before the child has the mental equipment to handle them'.⁷ Such narratives are both constitutive of the self for the story-teller, and act as organizational *schemata* for the multiple realities in which humans live. Bellah's analysis of the differing types of religion in the various pre-Axial Age societies (tribal, complex chieftainship, and archaic state) similarly draws attention to the narrative (rather than the conceptual) mode of constructing reality, and the way in which different types of social organization engender and reflect different narratives of identity and religion.

The fourth section uses Lonnie Kliever's contention that all 'religious belief systems' and 'life-worlds' are fictional,⁸ to shift attention to the role of fiction in inspiring a number of new (or 'new new') religions from the 1950s to the present day. These include both religions that are explicitly based on fictions (like the Church of All Worlds), and fictions that employ the conventions of religious scriptures (chiefly, the genre of 'speculative fiction', which includes science fiction and fantasy). It is argued that the process of world-building that generates the specific type of worldviews identified as 'religious' is rendered transparent in these 'fiction-based' religions.⁹ Bellah and Huizinga hypothesize about the origin of religion in the past; in the contemporary West it is possible to observe religion emerging from play, narrative, humour, the whimsical use of the category of the sacred, and experiences of Durkheimian collective effervescence.

⁴ Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, pp. 11-22.

⁵ Mark Chaves, 'Denominations as Dual Structures: An Organizational Analysis', in N. J. Demerath III, Peter Dobkin Hall, Terry Schmitt and Rhys H. Williams (eds), *Sacred Companies: Organizational Aspects of Religion and Religious Aspects of Organizations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 178.

⁶ Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, p. 1.

⁷ Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 80.

⁸ Lonnie D. Kliever, 'Fictive Religion: Rhetoric and Play'. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 49, no. 4 (1981), p. 658.

⁹ Markus Altena Davidsen, 'The Spiritual Milieu Based on J. R. R. Tolkien's Literary Mythology', in Adam Possamai (ed.) *Handbook of Hyper-real Religions* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012) pp. 185-204.

These movements are often derided as ‘joke’ or ‘parody’ religions, and excluded from the category of ‘real religion’. I argue that this reveals more about the scholars than the religions; as the model of ‘religion’ to which they adhere depends on the validation of the ‘world religions’ paradigm, and in particular the acceptance of Christianity as the normative religion *par excellence*. Michael Pye has remarked that in the discipline of religious studies the shadow of Christianity falls across all religions, and often obscures their shape almost entirely.¹⁰ I argue, contrary to those who would deny these movements a legitimate place in the family of religions, that these ‘invented’ religions are not rendered illicit by their lack of ‘revealed truth’ or supernatural origin. Rather, their narrative creativity and invitation to ‘serious play’ make invented religions peculiarly suited to the diffuse selves and communities based on elective affinity that are the basis of the modern secular plurality that undergirds twenty-first century Western society.¹¹

Huizinga and Bellah on Play, World Construction and Religion

In *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga acknowledged the existence of animal play, ‘[s]ince the reality of play extends beyond the sphere of human life’.¹² Yet human play encompasses much more than frolicking, and the animal enjoyment of the body. For Huizinga, play, which is spontaneous and ruptures the ‘everyday’, becomes if not the sole source, at least the sustenance of almost all of human culture. Language, myth and ritual, the ‘archetypal activities of human society’ are intimately related to play, and Huizinga builds a model of play that emphasises its voluntary and free nature, its capacity for seriousness despite its explicit lack of seriousness, its presumption of disinterest, its acknowledgement of ‘certain limits of time and space’, and its promotion of ‘the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means’.¹³ He devotes time to the etymology of ‘illusion’, which is related to the Latin terms *inlusio*, *illudere*, and *inludere*, all of which mean ‘in-play’, and draws attention to the fact that play is a ‘world’ that can be entered.¹⁴ Huizinga is concerned to situate play and games as agents of civilization. The connection of play with religion is supported by the fact that a religious festival like the Great Dionysia in Athens was the vehicle for the performance of drama as well as the worship of Dionysos, and that ritualized sport was very often part of worship of the gods, as in the ancient Olympic Games in honour of Zeus Olympios. It is interesting that both these examples involve competition and the lure of an extrinsic prize.¹⁵ Huizinga integrates this fact into his theory of play, arguing that ‘virtue, honour, nobility, and glory’ result from competition.¹⁶ He further asserts that play is core to ethics, law and war, and is detectable in philosophy, art, and other human cultural productions.

¹⁰ Michael Pye, ‘Religion: Shape and Shadow’, *Numen*, vol. 41, no. 1 (January 1994), p. 72.

¹¹ Carole M. Cusack, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010),

¹² Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 21.

¹³ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, pp. 22, 28 and 32.

¹⁴ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 30

¹⁵ Paul Cartledge, ‘The Greek Religious Festivals’, in P. E. Easterling and J. V. Muir (eds), *Greek Religion and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 111.

¹⁶ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 85.

In *Religion in Human Evolution*, Bellah is able to improve upon Huizinga's theory of play, due to an ever-expanding body of evidence from a range of disciplines including evolutionary biology, psychology, and cognitive development. Where Huizinga merely posits that different states are experienced within play, Bellah employs Abraham Maslow's distinction between Deficiency (D) cognition and Being (B) cognition, and argues that D-cognition parallels Schutz's 'daily life', as it involves 'the world of working ... the means/ends schema ... a clear sense of the difference between subject and object, and ... [a manipulative] attitude toward objects (even human objects)'.¹⁷ B-cognition, in contrast, is experienced when humans are motivated to participate not manipulate, and then experience the breakdown of the subject-object dichotomy and a sense of wholeness, conditions that often manifest in religious situations. Bellah makes much of the fact that the 'givenness' or naturalness of Schutz's daily life is itself a social construction that requires considerable effort to maintain, and offers examples of humans inhabiting multiple realities, including sleep, and participation in religious worldviews that mandate situations entirely different from the 'natural standpoint' (for example, the Buddha's teaching that the self is illusory, Hindu assertions that the material world is *maya*, or illusion, and the Christian view that temporal life on earth is only a dim preview of eternal life in heaven).¹⁸

Traditional religions tend to promote the view that God or the gods created (or shaped and refined) both the physical world and human beings. In secular modernity this process is inverted; humans may not create the physical world (though they shape it to a degree unheard of in the past), but they do engage collectively in world-construction, the creation of worldviews, individual identities, and communal identities. Peter Berger contended that religion is a part of this larger meaning-making enterprise, which humans achieve through three steps; externalisation, objectivation, and internalization. He states that, '[e]xternalization is the ongoing outpouring of human being [sic] into the world, both in the physical and the mental activity of men. Objectivation is the attainment of the products of this activity (again both physical and mental) of a reality that confronts its producers as a facticity external to and other than themselves. Internalization is the reappropriation by men of this same reality, transforming it once again from structures of the objective world into structures of the subjective consciousness. It is through externalization that society is a human product. It is through objectivation that society becomes a reality *sui generis*. It is through internalisation that man is a product of society'.¹⁹ This makes it clear that humans also create their god(s), an inversion of the Biblical model of divine creation in *Genesis*.

Bellah, using this type of social constructionist framework, moves from human experiences of Maslovian B-cognition to the types of experience commonly understood to be religious. He draws on the notion of 'flow', popularised by the Russian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, to argue that what he call a 'unitive state' (in which the subject-object divide is erased, time is speeded up or slowed down, and language becomes inadequate to the task of describing what has happened), is the paradigmatic somatic condition that underlies all 'religious' experiences, which are particular instances of such unitive states, represented within the culturally-specific frame of the religion to which the experiencer adheres.²⁰ He moves from somatic experience, the body being a constant in a work so

¹⁷ Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, p. 5

¹⁸ Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, pp. 8-11.

¹⁹ Peter Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969[1967]), p. 4.

²⁰ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990).

influenced by evolutionary biology, to the fact that religion is as much about representation, as it is about experience. Here he uses George Lindbeck's classification of current theories of religion into three types: first, the largely abandoned propositional theory, that religion 'is a series of propositional truth claims, stated conceptually'; second, the experiential-expressivist view that 'there is a general human capacity for religious experience that is actualized differently in different religious traditions'; and third, the cultural-linguistic theory, which sees symbols as 'shaping religious experiences and emotions'.²¹

Bellah himself argues that combining experiential-expressivist and cultural-linguistic approaches produces a richer understanding of religion (that is, these two perspectives offer rather different insights into the phenomenon of religion). He then discusses the representation of unitive states, noting that if individuals do not have these experiences themselves, the only possibility for understanding lies in the representation of the state. Bellah posits four such representations; unitive, enactive, symbolic, and conceptual. He draws upon psychology of child development, particularly the work of Jean Piaget and Jerome Bruner, but the general thrust of his argument is compatible with Huizinga's assertion of the vital role of play in human culture. For Bellah, unitive representations 'attempt to point to the unitive event or experience'. He links these attempts to what Piaget called the 'adualism' of the child. While avoiding the notion that unitive states (and thus religious experiences) are infantile, he argues developmental psychology has established that infants do not distinguish between the internally experienced world and the external world, and 'it may be that possibilities existing then, as in other kinds of early experiences, are never lost but can be reappropriated in much more complex form later on'.²² As Huizinga commented, young children are unselfconscious about their activities, and their imaginations run free. They 'play because they enjoy playing'.²³ Bellah also notes that unitive states may be communal as well as individual, and that Durkheimian collective effervescence may also point to the power of that experience.

Bellah's second category, enactive representations, draws on the work of Bruner. He is a developmental psychologist who advocates cultural psychology, one that is 'preoccupied [not] with "behavior" but with "action" ... and more specifically, with *situated action* – action situated in a cultural setting, and in the mutually interacting intentional states of the participants'.²⁴ Bellah derives enactive representation within religion from Bruner's notion that the earliest type of bodily acting out among children is characterised by the undifferentiated participation of body, mind and spirit (and thus points to the unitive event, through spontaneous gesture and embodiment). Children act out significance long before they have the capacity to formulate it verbally, which links to the earlier point that narrative structure (story) enables comprehension at far earlier stages of development than abstract modes of presentation such as philosophical syllogisms or scientific formulae (and also provides further evidence why the 'propositional' theory of religion has been abandoned). Thus, Pascal Boyer has argued that humans are hard-wired to find certain types of explanations convincing and worthy of trust. When explanations concern phenomena that are not observable, the reason why the explanation is accepted is because it attributes outcomes in the visible world to agents. Thus, human cognitive equipment finds it easier to accept that God or aliens (agents with causal power and will, presented via

²¹ Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, p. 11.

²² Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, p. 13.

²³ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 26.

²⁴ Bruner, *Acts of Meaning*, p. 19.

a narrative framework) created humans, than that humans have evolved over millennia.²⁵ This propensity to accept narratives about unseen causal agents is important for the transformation of fictional texts into scripture.

Finally, Bellah considers the category of symbolic representations, noting that Jean Piaget considered 'symbolic play' to be particularly important, as through the manipulation of symbols young children 'assimilate' reality to their 'needs, wishes, [and] desires'. This process includes: acting out scenarios the child experiences with others through the use of dolls and teddy bears (particularly apparent when the child experiences parental tension or other types of conflict); the game of 'peekaboo', which is amusing and non-threatening when a parent engages in the 'controlled vanishing' of a doll, teddy bear, pet, or person, but which causes distress to the child when the adult is a stranger (because it deals with separation anxiety specifically focused on the 'loss' of parents); and the abstract nature of children's early drawings.²⁶ Huizinga would add myth-making, poetry, music and drama, to complete the symbolic repertoire of human culture and society.²⁷ The final category of representation, conceptual, involves abstract reasoning and is linked to the developmental stage of late childhood, and to instances of religion where systematic theology is the dominant mode.²⁸

The Storytelling Self and the Narrative Community

Bellah engages directly with Huizinga in his consideration of ritual, and the types of explanation of humanity and the world that such rituals evoke. The centrality of language is emphasised, as 'after the appearance of fully syntactical language made narrative possible, characters in myths that were acted out in rituals could be other than human'. Myths and folktales throughout the world feature talking animals, and the range of 'powerful beings' in such narratives (angels, demons, spirits, animated natural phenomena, and so on) is extensive. Bellah endorses Huizinga's association of ritual with the 'sacred' but not with supernatural beings *per se*, and cautions against the use of the term god, due to 'the loaded meaning of that term in a culture deeply influenced by biblical religion'.²⁹ This resonates with the religious naturalism that is fundamental to the study of religion in the secular academy, and draws attention back to narrative and story-telling as the backbone of individual identity, community identity, and the development of religion. Jerome Bruner contends that the individual self is both narrative and 'distributed', engaged in telling stories about his or her self, and about others (that is, the construction of the self is inter-subjective).³⁰ Narrative identity is particularly interesting in that it may function as a bridge to what Bellah terms 'conceptual representation', although it is pre-theoretical, contains its own logic, and functions as an important form of representation in its own right. Narrative orders the events of Schutzian everyday life into a meaningful structure, and unitive events may appear as transformative elements in the 'culmination of a narrative, the discovery of a new order out of disorder'.³¹

²⁵ Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 326.

²⁶ Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, p. 21.

²⁷ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, pp. 151-162.

²⁸ Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, p. 37-43.

²⁹ Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, p. 95.

³⁰ Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990) p. 114.

³¹ Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, p. 36.

Bellah is also indebted to the work of neuroscientist and anthropologist Terrence Deacon, who with Tyrone Cashman suggested that narrative itself may have given rise to the idea of life after death, a contention supported by the fact that symbolism may make humans aware of the difference between the physical world and the symbolic order, as the ‘dualism of thing and word’ may engender metaphysical dualism’.³² This returns our attention to play, in that story-telling can be a mode of playful representation, both entertaining and speculative. Maurice Bloch says that the ‘capacity to imagine other worlds’ is a key human evolutionary adaptation, which contributes to the development of religions.³³ Thus the modes of religion are unitive, enactive, symbolic, and conceptual, paralleling Bruner’s stages of child development. Huizinga concurs that myth is an important site of creativity, play, and the human imagination, noting that the representation of the ‘incorporeal and the inanimate as a person is the soul of all myth-making and nearly all poetry’.³⁴

After he has established a cognitive evolutionary basis for the emergence of religion, Bellah considers the production of religious meaning in three social structures (tribal, complex chieftainship, and archaic state), which existed prior to the political and religious innovations of the ‘Axial Age’. To analyse Indigenous religions (including the Warlpiri of Australia, the Native American Navajo, and the Kalapalo of Brazil) in tribal societies, he makes use of the three-stage model of culture proposed by anthropologist Merlin Donald; mimetic, mythic and theoretic. These stages parallel the enactive, symbolic and conceptual modes of religion already discussed. Building on this he speculates that mimesis represents ‘an increase in conscious control over action that involves four uniquely human abilities: mime, imitation, skill, and gesture’.³⁵ This calls to mind the ways in which unitive, enactive and symbolic representations of unitive states function, and reiterates that the narrative (that is, pre-conceptual) organization of society continues to be effective into the modern era.³⁶ For example, the Dreaming stories of Indigenous Australians are complex, profound and remain deeply meaningful in modernity. Further, they are acted out in ritual, which is understood to participate in the ‘abiding time’ of the ancestral beings, and not merely to be a performance or ‘re-enactment’.³⁷

Bellah argues that the religious style of a complex chieftainship, typified by the Polynesian societies of Tikopia and Hawai’i, is focused on the issue of despotism and role of the paramount chieftain. When constructing a picture of archaic religion, the final pre-Axial Age societal model, Bellah focuses on ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia (which are important for ancient Israel and Greece), and Shang and Western Zhou China, which have ‘a smooth transition to the Chinese axial age’.³⁸ These societies are focused on the king, who had a particular relationship with God/the gods, but also advanced the cause of law and justice, erected monumental buildings for the ‘good’ of society, and saw the emergence of what Jan Assmann calls ‘mythospeculation’, a kind of explicit theology emerging from myth.³⁹ In these

³² Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, pp. 102-103.

³³ Maurice Bloch, ‘Why Religion is Nothing Special but is Central’, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, vol. 363 (2008), pp. 2055-2056.

³⁴ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 159.

³⁵ Merlin Donald, *A Mind So Rare: The Evolution of Human Consciousness* (New York: Norton, 2001), pp. 263-265.

³⁶ Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, p. 174.

³⁷ Tony Swain, *A Place For Strangers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

³⁸ Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, p. 210.

³⁹ Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, p. 241.

societies, as Bellah notes, ‘the “prime virtue” was obedience, [but] there were “sensitive and active minds” – prophets, priests, scribes – who, even within the confines of the cosmos as a state, could think new thoughts’.⁴⁰ This type of society is linked to the symbolic mode of representation of unitive events/religion, and examples of ritual drama (and thus, play) include the New Year rituals of Babylon, that enact the text of the *Enuma Elish*, and the Egyptian rituals surrounding the Memphite Theology of Isis and Osiris.

In between the Axial Age, characterised by urbanisation and the development of critical thought, and contemporary secular modernity, lies the rise of the ‘axial religions’, the ancestral forms of the ‘world religions’ paradigm (comprising the ‘Big Five’, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism). The category of ‘Indigenous Religion’ is modelled on the world religions template and exists as a catch-all for the small, local, and tribal religions that may not have anything in common but are manifestly not ‘world religions’.⁴¹ New religions tend to be relegated to the same sort of catch-all category, despite contemporary debates about the legitimacy of the term ‘religion’, and in particular the, the legitimacy of the world religions paradigm.⁴² The academic study of religion developed in the nineteenth century, as secularisation, which Berger defines as ‘the process whereby sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols’, progressively weakened the influence of institutional Christianity and enabled religious diversity to flourish.⁴³ The net result of the secularisation process has not been, as originally envisaged by Max Weber, Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud (among others), the death of religion in the West. Rather, the more positive framework of Durkheim, who asserted that new forms of religiosity would develop as older forms, has proved to be the case.

Yves Lambert has argued that the impact of modernity on religion creates four possible scenarios for its development: ‘decline, adaptation or reinterpretation, conservation, and innovation’,⁴⁴ and he noted that those most relevant to the growth of new religions, reinterpretation and innovation, tend to exhibit certain characteristics. These are this-worldliness, self-spirituality, immanent divinity, ‘pluralism, relativism, probabilism, ... pragmatism’, and a loose organizational structure.⁴⁵ This means that members of new and alternative religions will participate in a rather different fashion to those who were members of mainstream Christian churches. The criterion of truth is diminished in such religions; members are more likely to ask ‘does it work?’ than ‘is it true?’ An important, and possibly dominant, religious orientation in the contemporary West is that of the ‘seeker’, and seekers tend to reject lifelong allegiance to a religion, and will try a new practice or teaching should their current spiritual practice cease to satisfy them, or to ‘work’.

Fictional Religions and Religious Fictions

⁴⁰ Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, p. 264.

⁴¹ James L. Cox, *From Primitive to Indigenous: The Academic Study of Indigenous Religions* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 56-58.

⁴² Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁴³ Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion*, p. 107.

⁴⁴ Yves Lambert, ‘Religion in Modernity as a New Axial Age: Secularization or New Religious Forms?’ *Sociology of Religion*, vol. 60, no. 3 (Autumn 1999), p. 311.

⁴⁵ Lambert, ‘Religion in Modernity as a New Axial Age’, p. 323.

The first fictional religion in modernity was (arguably) revived Pagan Witchcraft, also known as Wicca, founded by British civil servant and colonial administrator Gerald Gardner (1886-1964). Gardner's books *Witchcraft Today* (1954) and *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (1959) brought Wicca to a wider audience after the 1951 repeal of the Witchcraft Act in the United Kingdom. However, Gardnerian Wicca, despite its use of fiction including Gardner's own novel *High Magic's Aid* (1949), claimed direct descent from the pre-Christian Pagan inhabitants of Europe, and the status of an 'authentic' Pagan tradition. Recent scholarship has established that this claimed lineage was false. Nevertheless, the status of Paganism as an invented tradition that has gained a profile as a *bona fide* religious tradition, is important. This is especially the case because Witchcraft has become imbricated with popular cultural forms and is featured in films (for example, 'The Craft', [1996]) and television series (for example, 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer [1997] and 'Charmed' [1998]), which contributed significantly to the mainstreaming of 'alternative' religions and esoteric spiritualities.⁴⁶ This article is concerned with another sub-group of new religions that also became visible in the 1950s, and have since become influential by means of the Internet, so-called 'invented religions'. This group includes Discordianism (founded 1957), the Church of All Worlds (founded 1962), the Church of the SubGenius (founded 1979), and many others, including Jediism and Matrixism.⁴⁷

New religious movements (NRMs) have a tendency to deliberately emulate the model of 'traditional religion' with regard to their origin and development. Thus, leaders link new teachings to existing traditions, and argue that they are merely contemporary statements of ancient wisdom; they establish the authority of new scriptures via claims of divine inspiration, including channelling, translation and the recording of mystical experiences.⁴⁸ Rituals are often modelled on familiar religious practices. Once a religion is accepted as 'authentic', innovations may be initiated without affecting its status as a 'real' religion. This is especially true of the 'world religions' (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism), as they originated in the distant past and have seen great changes over time.

'Invented religions' explicitly reject these means of establishing spiritual or historical authority, and openly announce their fictional status.⁴⁹ Thus they reject continuity with existing traditions, such as was claimed by early Wiccans and Pagans Paganism. Invented religions also view fictions, the ludic, and play as legitimate sources of ultimate meaning; in no sense inferior materials upon which to base a religion than factual accounts, attested experiences, or historical events. Therefore, Markus Davidsen has argued that they are more properly called 'fiction based religions'.⁵⁰ Invented religion, due to their playful origins and antinomian tendency to engage in mockery and humour, are often classified as 'parody religions'.⁵¹ Discordianism and the Church of the SubGenius (COSG) both buy into elaborate conspiracy theories, play with send-ups of ecclesiastical hierarchies, preach nonsensical doctrines, and prescribe comic rituals. Further, both of these groups have members who affirm that they are religious,

⁴⁶ Frances Chan, 'When Witches Came Out of the Broom Closet'. Paper presented to the 'Social Change in the 21st Century' conference at Queensland University of Technology (2003), at eprints.qut.edu.au/117/1/ChanFrancis.pdf.

⁴⁷ Cusack, *Invented Religions*, pp. 18-24.

⁴⁸ James R. Lewis, *Legitimizing New Religions* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003).

⁴⁹ Cusack, *Invented Religions*, p. 1.

⁵⁰ Markus Altena Davidsen, 'The Spiritual Milieu Based on J. R. R. Tolkien's Literary Mythology', in Adam Possamai (ed.) *Handbook of Hyper-real Religions* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), pp. 185-204.

⁵¹ David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2005), p.

members who affirm that they are not religious, and members who hold both positions simultaneously. Adam Possamai argues that as such phenomena are based on popular culture and are mediated by the Internet, they are ‘hyper-real religions’, using Jean Baudrillard’s concept that the hyper-real is the displacement of the real by simulacra.⁵² What is important is that these groups are both religious fictions and utilise fictions that exhibit the qualities of religion, such as fantasy and sci-fi. It can be argued that ‘fiction-based’ is especially applicable to Jediism, Matrixism and CAW, as they are all based on a particular literary or filmic text; whereas the founders of Discordianism and the COSG actually wrote the fictional narrative of the religion, and extrapolated a worldview, doctrines, and ritual practices from it.

The earliest significant invented religion is Discordianism, which was founded by Kerry Thornley (1938-1998) and Greg Hill (1941-2000) in East Whittier, California in 1957. Discordianism began as a parodic mockery of religion, with Eris the Greek goddess of discord an irreverent stand-in for Yahweh. In 1965 Hill wrote the first version of the scripture, *Principia Discordia*, also called the Magnum Opiate of Malaclypse the Younger, and subtitled *How I Found Goddess and What I Did to Her When I Found Her*, an anarchic ‘zine, with non-linear, surreal structure.⁵³ First published in 1969, it has been freely available ever since due to the Discordian policy of ‘kopyleft’. An example of humour and play in *Principia Discordia* is the Turkey Curse, which creates eristic (pro-life, chaotically free) vibrations that disrupt the aneristic (anti-life, expressively ordered) Curse of Greyface. The Turkey Curse involves waving one’s arms and chanting ‘GOBBLE, GOBBLE, GOBBLE, GOBBLE, GOBBLE, GOBBLE. The results will be instantly apparent’.⁵⁴ It appears undeniable that dancing around making turkey noises would have the effect of lightening the mood of a person oppressed by seriousness and alienated from play.

There are other rituals described in *Principia Discordia*, including the ‘POEE Baptismal Rite’, which involves nudity, dancing and the consumption of wine, and the ‘Sacred Erisian High Mass of the Krispy Kreme Kabal’, and the third commandment of the Pentabarf (the creed of Discordianism) requires that ‘[a] Discordian is required to, the first Friday after his illumination, Go Off Alone & Partake Joyously of a Hot Dog; this Devotive Ceremony to Remonstrate against the popular [Paganisms](#) of the Day: of [Roman Catholic](#) Christendom (no meat on Friday), of [Judaism](#) (no meat of Pork), of [Hindic](#) Peoples (no meat of Beef), of [Buddhists](#) (no meat of animal), and of Discordians (no Hot Dog Buns)’.⁵⁵ It is most appropriate that the principal means of evangelism for Discordianism was the incorporation of much of *Principia Discordia* into the best-selling science fiction trilogy *Illuminatus!* (1975), authored by Robert Shea and the champion of suppressed knowledge(s) and serial fringe religionist Robert Anton Wilson.⁵⁶ Due to its popularity with computer ‘geeks’, college students, and comic-book fans, Discordianism moved online and became (in a sense) the ‘parent’ tradition to other eclectic religious and esoteric systems, including the Church of the SubGenius (founded 1979 by Philo

⁵² Adam Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyper-Real Testament* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2005).

⁵³ Malaclypse the Younger, *Principia Discordia: How I Found Goddess and What I Did to Her When I Found Her* (Austin TX: Steve Jackson Games, 1994[1969]).

⁵⁴ Malaclypse the Younger and Omar Khayyam Ravenhurst, *Discordia: Hail Eris, Goddess of Chaos and Confusion* (Berkeley: Ronin Books, 2006), p. 175.

⁵⁵ Malaclypse the Younger, *Principia Discordia*, p. 4.

⁵⁶ David Robertson, ‘Making the Donkey Visible: Discordianism in the Works of Robert Anton Wilson’, in C. M. Cusack and A. Norman (eds) *Handbook of New Religions and Cultural Production* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), pp. 421, 429.

Drummond and Ivan Stang) and Chaos Magic, a movement heralded by the publication of Peter Carroll's *Liber Null* in 1978.

A second model of invented religion is exemplified in the Church of All Worlds (CAW), which was founded in 1962 by college students Lance Christie (1944-2010) and Tim Zell (1942-) at Westminster College, Fulton Missouri. This religion is based on Robert A. Heinlein's science fiction novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), in which Valentine Michael Smith, raised on Mars, brings a message of sexual liberation and religious pluralism to humanity. In the early years of CAW's existence, rites and doctrines were based on Heinlein's novel, but in 1968 Tim Zell registered CAW as a religion, and began incorporating elements of modern Paganism into its practice, in part due to his friendship with Frederick McLaren Adams (1928-2008), founder of Feraferia.⁵⁷ In 1970 Tim Zell had a vision that changed CAW's theology, with the focus shifting from the polytheistic goddess of revived Paganism to the notion that the Earth itself was the goddess, Gaia, a conscious entity incorporating all living being in which humans function as planetary consciousness. After this revelation, Lance Christie worked as an environmental activist, and Tim Zell (now Oberon Zell) and his second wife Morning Glory Zell (b. Diana Moore, 1948), undertook spiritual travel to ancient Pagan sites such as Eleusis, and devoted themselves to the modern revival of mythological beings such as unicorns, the pursuit of a sustainable, rural and communal lifestyle, and the practice of polyamory (the philosophy and lifestyle of responsible non-monogamy).⁵⁸ In the twenty-first century, CAW is loyal to its fiction-based origins, and is a major voice in environmental Paganism. CAW also leads the way as an invented religion that documents its history and records its cultural activities, both on websites and through a programme of intensive print publication (including promotion of the CAW magical education system, the Grey School of Wizardry, which appropriately is based on Hogwarts, the boarding school in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series of young adult novels). CAW thus demonstrates the use of a science fiction novel as a theologically meaningful programme for the establishment of a religion; a process made possible through the human receptivity to stories of unseen (in this case fictional) agents being responsible for actions in the world.

Scholarship has identified further members of the family of invented religions, including the Tribunal of the Sidhe, a group that used J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy as scripture,⁵⁹ Jediism, based on George Lucas' *Star Wars* film trilogy, and Matrixism, based on Larry and Andy Wachowski's *The Matrix* film trilogy.⁶⁰ Fictional texts are used in the broader Pagan and magical community (itself a religio-spiritual network with a fictional genealogy). Tolkienian Elven rituals and Chaos workings invoking Teletubbies are, although not mainstream, are present among eclectic Pagans and magical practitioners. While the study of invented religions is a new field, but has the potential to affect the discipline of religious studies through its challenge to the normative definitions employed by scholars. In 1981 Lonnie D. Kliever asserted that all 'religious belief systems' and 'life-worlds' were fictional. This contention has only recently attracted the attention it deserves, having been taken up by both cognitive scientific and social constructionist theorists of religion. Kliever argues that 'the social structures and cognitive standards of modern societies have conspired to unmask the illusory character

⁵⁷ Cusack, *Invented Religions*, pp. 62-63.

⁵⁸ V. Vale and John Sulak, *Modern Pagans: An Investigation of Contemporary Pagan Practices* (San Francisco: RE/Search Publications, 2001), pp. 130-136.

⁵⁹ Davidsen, 'The Spiritual Milieu Based on J. R. R. Tolkien's Literary Mythology', pp. 191-192.

⁶⁰ Cusack, *Invented Religions*, pp. 113-140.

of all sacral lifeworlds'.⁶¹ He then argued that modern religiosity, understood as play, 'construes a mysterious and indifferent universe *as if* it were humanely ordered and meaningful, though it is *not really* so'.⁶² The adoption of fictional narratives is one strategy to order and make meaningful the atomised and random contemporary world.

Conclusion

Invented religions are a newer model of religion that emphasises story, play, creativity, and the importance of individual and collective meaning-making. Whether the religions are based on fictions is, ultimately, unimportant. Mikael Rothstein argues that the ways that humans 'think and act during the formation of new religious thoughts and ways in general' have certain commonalities. He concludes that '[a]ll religions are negotiated cultural phenomena which only have me into existence because human beings have created them in a variety of cognitive and social transactions'.⁶³ This statement perfectly encapsulates the origins of invented religions, and points to the urgent necessity of recognizing them, not as 'parody' nor as 'fake' religions, but simply as religions.⁶⁴ In fact, as Huizinga argued long ago, Discordianism may be 'more real' than Christianity, because '[l]iving myth knows no distinction between play and seriousness. Only when myth has become mythology, that is, literature, borne along as traditional lore by a culture which has in the meantime more or less outgrown the primitive imagination, only then will the contrast between play and seriousness apply to myth – and to its detriment'.⁶⁵ The twenty-first century West has outgrown the primitive imagination of Christianity, which has become eviscerated of play, and retains only a seriousness that is of increasingly diminished relevance. Western individuals, liberated from institutional religions, become seekers of personal spiritualities and religious *bricolages*.⁶⁶ Invented religions, as a site of meaning-making where play and seriousness are united, are the authentic religious manifestation of the age.

⁶¹ Kliever, 'Fictive Religion: Rhetoric and Play', p. 658.

⁶² Kliever, 'Fictive Religion: Rhetoric and Play', p. 663.

⁶³ Mikael Rothstein, 'Hawaii in New Age Imaginations: A Case of Religious Invention', in James R. Lewis and Daren Kemp (eds), *Handbook of New Age* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007), pp. 315.

⁶⁴ Cusack, *Invented Religion*, p. 149.

⁶⁵ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 52.

⁶⁶ David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002[2000]), p. 76.