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Markus Altena Davidsen (ed.), (2018) *Narrative and Belief: The Religious Affordance of Supernatural Fiction*. London: Routledge. ix + 126 pp. ISBN 9781138559660 (hbk.)

One of the core dimensions of religion is the mythic or narrative, but while textual studies abound in the discipline of comparative religion, hardly any is informed by narratology or the study of narratives. This book is a rare exception. It consists of five articles that were previously published as a special issue of the journal *Religion* (46:4) in 2016 and reflect the result of the symposium “Narrative and Belief: International Symposium on the Persuasive Power of Religious Narratives and Supernatural Fiction” held at Leiden University in 2014. This volume is exempt from the disunion that can haunt other edited volumes, because the authors actually respond to each other and contribute to answering two shared research questions: first, can religious narratives and supernatural fictions be distinguished (p. 2), and second, which textual features of fictional narratives solicit religious usage (which Davidsen calls “religious affordance”) (p. 3)? What can be noted about these research questions is that they focus on the texts themselves, rather than on any individual or community interpreting these texts in a religious fashion. Neither the interpreters nor the authors of these texts are theorized, nor is that the goal of this volume. Rather, contrary to other scholarship on religious texts, the texts are taken not to be passive canvases for interpretive communities who can and will read their own ideas into them, but as active participants in the interpretive process by virtue of the religious affordance they possess.

Although it is a slim volume, it is divided into a theoretical and an empirical section, with the article by Laura Feldt constituting a bridge between the two. The first two articles, by Anders Klostergaard Petersen and Markus Altena Davidsen, provide theoretical discussions. Petersen argues that the difference between a religious and fictional narrative can only be determined based on usage and the epistemological stance by the readers of the text, and not on the content of the text or the author’s claim (or lack thereof) to have written a truthful account (pp. 12–17). Petersen seems inconsistent about this epistemological stance, however, for later he argues that fictional narratives are somehow of “a more profane nature” (p. 17). It is unclear to me whether Petersen means here that the text establishes this “more profane nature” itself, or whether this is an effect created by the reader. Petersen also claims that while fictional and religious narratives do not differ much in terms of content (p. 23), religious narratives do claim to be more than fiction (p. 26). It is not uncommon, however, for fictional narratives to claim that they are true accounts for storytelling effect. It is a common feature of modern legends, for example, where authenticity claims are provided by vague references to a source, often in the form of a

friend-of-a-friend (Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and Their Meanings*, 1981, p. 4). Petersen identifies two specific traits (which Davidsen calls “veracity mechanisms”) of a text that increases the likelihood that a narrative featuring supernatural agents is used in a religious manner (which means, in Davidsen’s terms, that the “veracity mechanisms” increase a text’s “religious affordance”). The first veracity mechanism is that elements from the story-world, such as its proposed supernatural agents, can be projected on the actual world (pp. 19–20). The second describes how the fictional text allows the readers to interpret their own life as a continuation of the narrative (pp. 26–28).

Davidsen, contrary to Petersen, argues that the author’s intention is what differentiates religious and fictional narratives (p. 40), which makes it possible to make an analytical distinction between supernatural fiction that is meant to be read as fictional and religious narratives that, while including fantastical elements, are still meant to be taken as true. Davidsen argues that, for a fictional narrative to have religious affordance, it needs to include both “narrative religion” (especially supernatural agents who become involved in humans’ lives; p. 39) and “veracity mechanisms” that create an aura of factuality around the text. He identifies ten veracity mechanisms (pp. 42–53), which include those given by Petersen but not the one discussed by Feldt. Davidsen’s veracity mechanisms are divided into evidence mechanisms, which establish the logics of the story-world, and anchoring mechanisms, which transfers the logics of the story-world upon the actual world (p. 41). In the final paragraph, Davidsen explores, using examples from *Star Wars* and Tolkien’s literary mythology, how conceptual blending theory can be used to analyze how veracity mechanisms steer the religious interpretation of texts featuring fantastic elements (pp. 54–55).

The third article, by Laura Feldt, provides a bridge between the two parts of the volume by focusing on both theoretical considerations and providing case studies on the portrayal of religion in J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series and Philip Pullman’s trilogy *His Dark Materials*. Like Petersen, Feldt emphasizes that religious and fictional narratives can only be distinguished by how they are used (p. 67). Contrary to Davidsen, she argues that the textual traits that increase the religious affordance of fantastic narratives are exactly the same as those traits that make these narratives worth reading as fiction. These are the employment of supernatural characters, events, actions, and spaces (“narrative religion”), and the construction of purposeful and teleological story-worlds (which could be said to constitute another “evidence mechanism” besides those identified by Davidsen; p. 66). In the end, Feldt demonstrates how studying supernatural fiction clarifies something about religion: rather

than assuming that religions demand absolute certainty about the existence of supernatural agents, both religion and fiction play with mystery around and uncertainty about these supernatural agents (p. 81).

The final two articles, by Carole Cusack and Dirk Johannsen, present illuminative case studies. Cusack presents the Church of All Worlds, a neo-pagan movement based upon Heinlein's novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*. Unlike the other contributions to the volume, Cusack's article describes in great detail how a community of readers actually use a narrative in a religious way, and showcases not only how religions may emerge from play and narrative, but also how invented religions fit within the 21st-century Western culture, sharing its individual, consumerist, secular, and eclectic features (p. 99). For Cusack, the veracity mechanisms as defined by Davidsen do not seem to be necessary for religious affordance. Rather, "narrative religion" is sufficient, which in this case means that the narrative provides supernatural agents to which the readers can relate (pp. 97–98).

Johannsen's contribution focuses on how the difference between fictional and religious narrative was debated in 19th-century Norway. Not only does Johannsen introduce an English-reading audience to some of the early theoretical ideas in Norwegian folkloristics, he also provides a lengthy description of the Nordic movement Modern Breakthrough (*Det moderne gennembrud*) and Arne Garborg's *Haugtussa*, demonstrating how authors in 19th-century Norway navigated the distinction between fantastic and realist literature. Next to that, it is demonstrated how these debates often employ the same assumptions as found in modern cognitive theory, such as the psychologizing of folkloric motifs or counter-intuitive agents (p. 111).

The five contributions are synthesized by Davidsen in the Introduction in the form of four conclusions: (1) any narrative that presents supernatural agents as real within the story-world (meaning that it utilizes "evidence mechanisms") allows a religious reading, even if the narrative does not claim to be more than fiction (meaning that "anchoring mechanisms" are absent); (2) rituals described in such narratives might be a model for the rituals of readers, as is the case with the Church of All Worlds; (3) if, next to that, the narrative also anchors itself in the actual world, then it can inspire the belief that the narrative tells a story about the past of the actual world; and (4) veracity mechanisms of various kinds enhance each other, essentially meaning that texts containing multiple veracity mechanisms increase the religious affordance of that text (pp. 7–8).

In the theoretical discussions, the text and its qualities allowing for religious affordance are the main focus. Authorship also comes to the fore in Johannsen's case study on Arne Garborg's *Haugtussa*, while it is also mentioned briefly in

Feldt's case study on *His Dark Materials*, both providing examples of how authors actively want to influence ongoing discourses on religion (pp. 70, 117). Readership is only featured extensively in Cusack's contribution, while its inclusion in other places would have strengthened certain arguments. For example, Petersen claims that texts do have some autonomy in determining their meaning, because otherwise scholars will never agree on a textual analysis (p. 15). The wish for agreement is not a convincing argument, however. More convincing would be that there is perhaps more agreement on interpretations that take account of all features of a text without adding to them, while more playful or outlandish interpretations will be rejected more often.

This volume offers more than a theoretical and actualized dive into fiction-based religions. It applies narratological theory to the study of (functionally) religious texts, and documents the theoretical discussions between some of the key players in the field. But its relevance is wider. In Feldt's words, the study of supernatural fiction blurs the boundaries between fiction and religion, showcasing how the uncertainty of what is actually real creates the fascination and sense of mystery that is part of both religion and fiction (p. 81). It generates a dynamic understanding of religion that is not absolute but rather fragmented and ever-changing (p. 81). In short, this volume is key to understanding the place and relevance of religion today.

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