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Abstract

Studies of religion and fandom have tended to explore the extent to which fan cultures might be seen as forms of surrogate religion. This article suggests that a more detailed examination of the way in which believers use their faith within their individual fandoms would offer more interesting insights into both contemporary religious practice and fandom. Conducting a case study of 'Brony' fandom (adult fandom of cartoon My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic), this article explores the ways in which Christian fans use fan fiction and art to promote religious literacy, explore theological issues, and engage in evangelism and exegesis. Fan knowledge is used as a way to quickly impart and explore complex religious concepts in a manner which utilises the shared culture of fandom. This should not be seen as a symptom of 'mediatisation' but as part of a complex synthesis of faith and popular culture.

Keywords: Fandom, Popular Culture, Evangelism, My Little Pony, Bronies, Religious narrative, Fan fiction

Reconsidering Religion and Fandom: Christian fan works in *My Little Pony* Fandom

On April 18 2013 the Christian quiz show *American Bible Challenge* featured a round entitled ‘Four Ponies of the Apocalypse’. Contestants were required to guess whether phrases or names were taken from the Bible or from the cartoon *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. While this might have appeared to have been a straight-forward task, for those who mistakenly identified ‘Emerald Rainbow’ as a pony rather than a phrase from Revelation, or inserted Equestrian pop star ‘Sapphire Shores’ into scripture, identifying where the Bible ended and *My Little Pony* began proved harder than first thought.

While the producers of *American Bible Challenge* intended a humorous comparison in their choice of subject matter, the idea that ponies and scripture could merge is not as far-fetched as might be imagined. Since its launch in late 2010, the cartoon series *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (hereafter *MLP:FiM*) has attracted an oft-commented upon adult fandom (known as ‘Bronies’) which has expanded the world of the show by generating a significant amount of fan-produced media (Johnson 2013; Robertson 2013; Veale 2013). Within the myriad fan works which have emerged in Brony culture, Christian fans have made use of *MLP:FiM* as a resource through which to explore religious themes, engage in evangelism, and generate alternative methods of biblical exegesis. While the majority of studies of fandom and religion have aimed to explore the structural similarities of fandom to religion, this article argues that studies of this area should move in a different direction. Instead of asking whether fandom can be seen as a form of substitute religion, it examines the ways in which fans use their existing belief with their object of fandom as a form of theological discourse. Using Bronies as a case study, I argue that fandom offers a particularly fruitful

arena for believers to engage in theological exploration. These engagements include fan fiction, artworks, and reworkings of biblical narratives using characters and images from *MLP:FiM*.¹ In examining these fan productions, I suggest that fan exploration of imagined worlds can operate as a powerful way of communicating faith-based positions, teaching religious literacy, and dealing with objections towards faith in fandom, and fandom in faith communities.

I. Religion and Fandom

The place of religion in studies of fandom has often been problematic. A common approach to the issue has been the idea that fandom itself represents a kind of surrogate religion. Michael Jindra (1994), for example, found that *Star Trek* fandom might be constituted a religion in Clifford Geertz's terms, while Erika Doss (1999) highlighted the supposed devotion, prayers, and religion-like community she discovered in Elvis fandom. John Lyden (2012) has similarly suggested that *Star Wars* fandom can function as a form of religion for its fans, even outside of the fiction-based religion of Jediism, while Iver Neumann argues that the success of the Harry Potter series is experienced as a form of faith by its fans and should be seen as part of a wider 'return to religion' (2006). These kinds of comparisons are problematic on a number of levels. Firstly, they set up a conflict between 'established' religion and a potentially blasphemous fandom that suggests that fandom and traditional faith are incompatible in some form (Doss 1999, 73-74; Neumann 2006, 91-94).

¹ All fan fiction and art works referenced here are used by permission of their authors. I have broadly followed the ethical approach laid out in Busse and Helkenson 2012. All authors were approached and offered the option of being referenced by pseudonym and having story titles changed, as well as having a link to the general archive rather than direct links referenced. All those referenced here preferred to use existing titles and usernames and requested direct linking. Authors were also invited to comment on a draft of this paper prior to submission.

Secondly, such approaches threaten to return fans to pathologised ‘cultists’ in implying an unreasonable attachment to their object of fandom, as Henry Jenkins has noted (2013, 9-49). Most problematically, they tend to ignore fan claims that their experience of fandom is not akin to religion. Doss, in arguing that Elvis fans falsely deny that their fandom is ‘religious’ because they want to avoid being labelled fanatics (1999, 73-74), implies that only the (supposedly detached) scholarly observer has the right to declare which activities are and are not religious, while ignoring the views of those actually engaged in them. The danger here is not simply that we arbitrarily label fandom as religious, but as in David Chidester’s work in which baseball, Coca-Cola, and Tupperware all become ‘religious’ (2005), that the term itself becomes so general as to be useless as an analytical category.

More sensitively, Matt Hills has spoken about a ‘neo-religiosity’ in fandom, in which fans appropriate religious discourse as a way to explain an otherwise inexplicable interest in their chosen fan object (2002, 117-130), while Daniel Cavicchi has highlighted the similarities between the ways in which people understood their entrance into fandom and Evangelical Christian conversion narratives (1998, 38-59). These applications, alongside interesting examinations of Durkheimian theories of effervescence and ritual in popular music fandom (Duffett 2013, 143-153; Löbert 2012) and Markus Altena Davidsen’s useful division between fandom and ‘fiction based religion’ (2013) suggest ways in which Religious Studies can be fruitfully applied to the study of fandom without reductively viewing it as a form of ‘religion’.²

² For further arguments against the ‘fandom as religion’ paradigm see Duffett 2003 and McCloud 2003.

Digging a little deeper into the ‘fandom as religion’ metaphor, an interesting and neglected element of the discussion can be identified. When Cavicchi reported the ‘conversion stories’ of Springsteen fans, he noted that all but one interviewee had been brought up in mainstream religious traditions and the majority currently practiced a faith (1998, 51). Likewise, Doss’s interviewees vehemently denied worshipping Elvis, instead affirming his importance within existing faith structures. Where Doss saw their denials of fandom’s religiosity as being driven by fear of accusations of blasphemy, her interviewees suggested that their fan object was co-opted into their existing belief system in a way in which the affective power of Elvis was affirmed, while their faith remained untroubled (1999, 79-106). In other words, God was seen to be using Elvis to grow and develop their faith, rather than to rival it.

Instead of asking whether fandom should be seen as a surrogate faith, a more interesting question relates to the way in which faith works *in* and *with* fandom. This article presents a case study of a number of religious fan works within one contemporary fandom. By its nature, this implies certain limits. I focus on explorations of Christianity in fandom, but do not want to suggest that fans of other faiths do not use their belief in similar ways. By focusing on a fandom based predominantly in the US and UK, it is perhaps unsurprising that Christianity is the dominant tradition— although I have also come across Muslim, Mormon, and Pagan fan works in my research. Similarly, it would be wrong to imply that the fan works examined here are necessarily typical or representative of all Christian fans, or of Bronies in general. Fan productions are, by their very nature, diverse and highly individual. Nonetheless, the fan works examined here do share certain similarities in the way in which they combine faith with fandom.

In turning to these fan works, there are particular reasons why Christian fans might use their fandom to engage in what has been described by scholars as a wider ‘participatory’ or ‘convergent’ media culture (e.g. Jenkins 2006). It is true that some Christian approaches to popular culture have sought to discover supposedly Christian elements within the texts they examine – in John Lyden’s words to ‘baptise’ popular culture (2003, 24). Books which claim to help Christians find the (Evangelical) gospel in *Harry Potter* or *The Matrix* fall into this category (see Clark 2003, 39-44; Lynch 2005, 33-36). Yet this does not appear to be the way in which the majority of Christian fans employ their faith. Instead of looking to elements of the core text for latent Christian themes, they instead use the text as a starting point for their own faith-based explorations. In this way, fans can use popular culture as a ‘symbolic inventory’ (Hoover 2006) to address concerns in their faith.

Work on the way in which popular culture can be used to construct and support faith has often focused on how individuals have used these resources to create new forms of spirituality. For example: Danielle Kirby’s examination of the Otherkin (2013), Christopher Partridge’s exploration of the ‘re-enchantment’ of the West through the development of ‘occulture’ (2005), or Jin Kyu Park’s discussion of anime as a tool through which fans can construct personal spiritual spaces for exploration of alternative spiritualities (2005). Such approaches are contrasted to the way in which Evangelical and mainstream Christians use media, with believers often finding difficulty in seeing any religious meaning at all in their media consumption (Hoover 2006). In contrast to this, Christian fan works demonstrate the way in which media can be consciously used to communicate orthodox faith positions, with media sources part of a complex *bricolage* of contemporary Christian identity.

In using fandom to communicate their faith, fans further offer up a justification for a fandom which may be looked down upon in their particular religious subculture. In Lynn Scofield Clark's exploration of adolescent spirituality, for example, she found a number of interviewees were nervous when talking about media consumption as a force which distracted them from engaging in evangelism (2003, 148-151). Fans can overcome this issue by using fan fiction or art as a form of religious expression and outreach. Beyond this, fan works can act as a way of promoting religious literacy. In contemporary Anglo-American society, Christians can no longer assume a baseline of biblical knowledge which might have been the case in previous generations. In this context, fandom provides pre-existing characters, settings, and moral concepts which can be used to bridge gaps in religious literacy; acting as exemplars and models for exploring religious themes. In other words, fan literacy *enables* religious literacy by using the shared knowledge common in fandom (Booth 2010, 68-70) as an entry point into theological questions. In examining the way in which Christian Bronies explore these themes, a brief introduction to the world of *My Little Pony* is first necessary. This will be followed by an examination of the fan works themselves.

II. *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*

My Little Pony began as a line of toys marketed by Hasbro Inc. in 1982. The collectable ponies were accompanied by various cartoon specials and series from 1984 onwards, none of which found particular success. In 2010, with the launch of the fourth

generation of toys, Hasbro recruited animator Lauren Faust, known for work on *The Powerpuff Girls* amongst others, to develop a version of *My Little Pony* to launch on their new network, 'The Hub'. Subtitled *Friendship is Magic*, the new show was designed by Faust to move away from some of the clichés of contemporary television for young girls such as an overly pink colour palate and undeveloped characterisation: 'Too much stuff for girls is about tea parties and holding hands and skipping down the lane' (Faust in Ohanesian 2012). Prior to the show's launch, Amid Amidi of animation fansite *Cartoon Brew* wrote an article claiming that *MLP:FiM* represented the end of a golden age of 'creator-driven' animation (2010). This prompted members of anime image-sharing site *4Chan*, notorious for its creation of internet memes such as the 'LOLCat' phenomenon (amongst much darker material), to watch and comment on the first episodes of the show. The reaction to *MLP:FiM* created a flood of pony related images and memes which spread across *4Chan* and other sites. While initially approached ironically, increasing numbers of posters viewed the show in an 'earnest, non-ironic' manner which has been dubbed 'neo-sincerity' (Robertson 2013, 25). As the show's online popularity spread, a portmanteau term 'Bronies' ('Bros' and 'Ponies') was coined to describe the adult fandom surrounding it. While this has raised questions regarding gender inclusivity (female fans sometimes describe themselves as 'Pegasisters'), the term has generally come to apply to fans regardless of gender (Blue 2013, 189-194; Robertson 2013). A recent survey found that Bronies were 80% male and generally aged from 15-35, with a mean age of 21.4 (Coderbrony 2014). As with other popular culture fandoms, fans discuss the show online, speculating about future plots and character arcs, while also expanding the world of the show through fan fiction, art works, and a particularly active music scene. Plastic ponies, plush toys, and collector's figures (designed for display rather than play) are collected. Large conventions and smaller local 'meets' keep fans in touch with one another in the physical world as well as online.

The show's wide appeal can partly be put down to its use of many tropes that are familiar from cult media.³ The show's world is hyperdiegetic (producers have engaged in world building and references to areas and events unseen onscreen) and actively rewards careful fan viewers: events from previous episodes or seasons are regularly referred to as background details to reward the loyal audience (Hills 2004). Despite the trappings of cult TV, it needs to be remembered that the show is aimed at children, and producers have attempted to maintain this focus. At the same time they have engaged adult fans through occasional pop culture references in the show (e.g. nods to *The Big Lebowski*, *Doctor Who*, and *Bioshock*), and through increasingly large-scale fan-run conventions.⁴ The show's lack of cynicism while avoiding sentimentalism is often the reason given for the 'neo-sincerity' displayed by Bronies (Robertson 2013, 28).

To understand the way in which fans use fandom to express their religious positions, it is necessary to describe the central premise of the show itself. *MLP:FiM* is set in the land of Equestria, governed by the benevolent Princess Celestia and her sister Princess Luna. The princesses rule over a variety of multi-coloured ponies divided into three groups: the strong 'earth ponies', magical unicorns, and flying 'pegasus ponies' who control the weather. Each pony has a unique 'cutie mark' on their rump representing their special talent and life calling. This mark develops at some point in adolescence and is seen as the key rite of passage in pony society.

³ The term 'cult' here is not used in a prerogative sense, but rather to refer to a form of popular television and film consisting of large imagined worlds and deferred narrative, which tend to generate fandoms. See Hills 2004.

⁴ For example, Bronycon 2014 in Baltimore attracted nearly 10,000 attendees.

The show focuses on six central characters (known in fandom as the ‘Mane Six’). At the centre of this group is Twilight Sparkle—an intelligent, bookish, unicorn (and from season three’s finale a princess). She is joined by the hard-working earth pony Applejack; hyperactive party planner Pinkie Pie, and Rarity, a unicorn fashion designer. Two pegasi, the retiring and socially anxious Fluttershy and the athletic, tomboyish Rainbow Dash complete the central lineup. While these descriptions might suggest the characters as broad stereotypes, each is complex and demonstrates significant development over the four seasons. These six ponies each embody one part of the ‘Elements of Harmony’: Kindness (Fluttershy), Honesty (Applejack), Laughter (Pinkie), Generosity (Rarity), Loyalty (Rainbow) and Magic (Twilight). The Elements are represented by a set of magical artefacts that combine together to form the ‘magic of friendship’ which can be used to defeat evil, a device which draws on the ‘magical girl’ genre of anime popularised in shows such as *Sailor Moon* and *Cardcaptor Sakura* (Blue 2013, 10-14). Each episode sees the characters learn a lesson about friendship, and loose story arcs have tied each season together.

In addition to the ‘Mane Six’, Equestria is populated by a number of other colourful pony characters for fans to draw upon in fanworks. Despite its idealistic setting, the show presents inter-character conflict as well as dangers in the form of monsters and powerful magical artefacts. Over four seasons, *MLP:FiM* has constructed a detailed canonical mythology, including the history of Equestria’s founding, the role of the chaos monster/trickster Discord both in sowing disorder in the far past and his more recent reformation, and detailed explorations of pony society. These areas have been expanded in the popular ‘all age’ comics (which sold over 1 million copies in less than a year) and tie-in

books, which though designed for readers aged five and above, contain a number of references to and for Bronies.⁵ The status of *MLP:FiM* as a transmedia franchise, as with more traditional telefantasy narratives, gives fans space to use the show as a creative resource. This means appropriating characters and scenarios, exploring gaps in television stories, and reworking the settings of the show to produce new ‘alternative universes’ featuring characters. The show provides a distinctive language for these works as fans ‘ponify’ the language they use in fan fiction and art: ‘everybody’ becomes ‘everypony’, ‘handmade’ becomes ‘hoofmade’ and so on.

III. Christian Fan Fiction and Art

Christian fan fiction and art can, at one level, act both as a defence and a legitimisation of media practice, and of involvement in a seemingly ‘unusual’ fandom in particular.

MLP:FiM paradoxically avoids the difficulties associated with many ‘cult’ texts in Christian contexts (e.g. sex, violence, gore) while simultaneously challenging traditional notions of gender and ‘age appropriate’ behaviour in the constitution of its fandom. As a result, fan

⁵ The author of the books, G.M. Berrow, engages with fans on Twitter and at conventions. The books have anticipated events on the TV show, and been used to establish canonical status. The plot of Berrow’s *Rainbow Dash and the Daring Do Double Dare* (2014) focuses on Rainbow’s position as a fan, her cosplaying, and her speculations on the hyperdiegetic world of her favourite book series. Amazon.com reviews of the book see parents commenting on the text’s utility as a tool for teaching reading, while fans simultaneously debate its canonicity. See http://www.amazon.com/My-Little-Pony-Rainbow-Chapter/dp/0316247987/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1405595002&sr=8-1&keywords=rainbow+dash+and+the+daring+do+double+dare

work can promote the morally beneficial values of the show while serving to justify it as ‘appropriate’. Recent fan discussions on a *Deviant Art* group for Christian Bronies, for example, reported bullying and abuse for admitting their fandom. This is often linked to a fear in some Christian sources that fandom is undermining traditional gender roles, or working against Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 13:11 that Christians should ‘give up childish things’ (e.g. Elmore 2014). Artwork such as the animated gif ‘stamps’ for use on *Deviant Art* profiles that proclaim that Christianity does not preclude being a Brony, offer a way of responding to critiques of the show from within the Christian community. The stamps, designed to be placed on individual profiles as a form of identification, allow users to display messages such as ‘I’m a Brony, I’m also a Christian’, or to respond to criticism in a sarcastic manner (‘So let me get this straight. The fact that I’m a Christian and I believe in God, denies me the right to like *My Little Pony*?’). The final panel of this stamp features a picture of Discord, chaos monster and antagonist in several episodes of *MLP:FiM*, next to a line of dialogue: ‘Oh what fun is there in making sense?’. Playing on fan knowledge, the gif suggests a connection between Christian critics of fandom and the nonsensical figure of Discord (AnScathMarcach 2014). Similarly, a number of pieces of fan artwork combine Rainbow Dash with a C.S. Lewis quotation on the true nature of adulthood from his 1951 essay ‘Three Ways of Writing for Children’. Here, Lewis explicitly reworked 1 Corinthians 13: ‘When I became a man, I put away childish things, including the fear of childishness and the desire to be very grown up’ (Lewis 1982). These images make use of a noted Christian literary and apologetic figure as a way of helping to legitimate fandom within Christian circles.⁶

⁶ These artworks are unattributed.

A second reason as to why fans might use the show as a lens through which to examine religion relates to the nature of the imagined world it creates. As Michael Saler has written, the vast imagined worlds represented in contemporary fandom can operate as ‘public spheres of the imagination’; safe abstracted spaces for the exploration and discussion of controversial issues (Saler 2012). *MLP:FiM* does not only create such a world, but constructs a universe which is apparently free from religion, providing a space for fans to freely project religious concepts.⁷ The show can thus be used to consider the intrusion of religion into an irreligious world, mirroring the difficulties fans face in introducing their faith in a broadly secular context. This appeal, rooted in the text, combines with wider involvements in fandom. The majority of fans creating Christian fan works are not only producing faith-based material. Their Christian fan work reflects part of a wider involvement in the community which includes writing fan fiction without any particular religious position, general discussion of the show, and attendance at Brony meet-ups. As faith and fandom are both important elements of an individual’s life world, it is unsurprising to see them appear together at some times, but not constantly. Moreover, the use of religion in fan works should not be thought to lack playfulness. Fandom is predominantly experienced as fun, and this is retained in the works examined here. However, playfulness should not be mistaken for superficiality whether displayed either in fan engagement (Booth 2010, 12) or in religion (Kirby 2013, 125).

There are several ways in which fan works can address faith-based positions. Fan fiction and art works act as tools through which certain competencies can be communicated.

⁷ In correspondence on an earlier draft of this paper, it was pointed out that the fact that religion is not openly dealt with on the show does not preclude fans from speculating on its existence within the show’s world. Equestrian society certainly has a series of nature rituals which might be considered religious at some level. See ([AUTHOR] 2014).

Most obviously, they allow readers to develop literacy in fan discourse and the ‘fanon’⁸ surrounding the core text. As Rebecca Black observed, fan fiction can also work to teach wider literary skills, genre writing, and language learning (Black 2008, 10-17; Jenkins 2006, 167-205). Similarly, fan fiction can teach religious literacy through the deployment of characters and scenarios familiar to fans in ways which communicate particular religious positions. Whereas in the nineteenth century George Eliot could depend upon her readers having the necessary biblical background to pick up scriptural allusions in her novels, in contemporary fan fiction the equation can be reversed: religious literacy can be taught through the fan’s awareness of the object of their fandom. For example, in *MLP:FiM* Christian fan works, readers can be educated about the Bible through allusions to Applejack’s character traits as she reacts to or embodies particular religious ideas. As Sheilagh Pugh notes, in fan fiction characters become ‘a shared resource the whole community of [a] fandom feels it knows and cares about’ (Pugh 2005, 67; see also Coppa 2006). When characters in fan fiction engage with religious elements within a narrative they can therefore communicate specific ideas and concepts about those elements without the author needing to undertake detailed expositional work. In other words, they work as shorthand to teach readers about religious ideas. As Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (2006) have argued, fan fiction is read intertextually not only in relation to its parent franchise but also in relation to other fan fictions the reader has encountered (see also Kaplan 2006). A faith-based interpretation of particular characters therefore has the potential to suggest the possibility of applying religious readings to texts found across the fandom.

⁸ ‘Fanon’ denotes non-canonical elements of a media text which are nonetheless widely accepted in fan culture as part of the text’s world.

Beyond this, characters can work as affective symbols that enable engagement with the fan audience on a deeper emotional level. As Cornel Sandvoss (2005) has argued, the appeal of fan texts to individuals often resides in the way in which they act as a mirror of the self. Fans find meaning in the text that is constitutive not only of who they are, but also reflects back an idealised version of the self that encourages development and improvement. As Jed A. Blue, author of the blog (and book) *My Little Po-Mo* reflected on his own Brony conversion, he discussed how his initial ambivalence to *MLP:FiM* changed after viewing the seventh episode of the first season:

Then ‘Dragonshy’ happened, and I realized that I am Fluttershy, and she is me. I’ve never identified with a fictional character as strongly as I do her... But Fluttershy is not just me. She is me at my best, a better version of me. Even as I watch her grow in the show, I realize that I have the capacity to be much of what is good about her, and to borrow the things she learns about herself. (2013, 201)

Consequently, using established characters that already carry a particular affective weight with fans enables authors to quickly model and communicate appropriate reactions to religious ideas.

This use of characters can take a variety of forms. It is possible for fans to engage directly with individual episodes as a way of exploring faith. Mattias Unidostres’ ‘A Rainbow’s Prayer’ uses textual gaps in the second season episode ‘May the Best Pet Win!’ to explore the nature of pride and repentance. The episode centres on Rainbow Dash’s attempts to find a new pet by putting various animals through their paces, a scheme which comes to an unfortunate end where her showboating results in her becoming trapped in ‘Ghastly Gorge’. Here she is rescued by ‘Tank’, an unfavoured tortoise who proves that the ‘best pet’ need not

be the fastest. 'A Rainbow's Prayer' inserts its narrative between two lines of dialogue which could be taken to imply a faith position ('Somepony! Anypony! Help me!... Wahoo! My prayers have been answered!'), imagining the nature of the prayers Rainbow might have offered up in her distress.

Beginning with self-justification, in particular the idea that her fate is undeserved, Rainbow meditates on scripture and comes to an awareness of the selfishness of her search for a pet. This leads her to recall the importance of the doctrine of total depravity and the fullness of Christ's sacrifice:

'Please God, don't leave me like this... I don't deserve it. I don't-.'

Dash suddenly caught herself and sighed, 'No, I deserve a lot worse actually.

And if it weren't for you, Christ, I'd still be headed right towards it...'

Rainbow models the practical application of scriptural lessons in a believer's life, as she uses her memories of personal Bible reading with the witness of the Spirit ('The Scripture was the only book she ever read... As she sat there, she did her best to search for the Holy Spirit within her.') to locate meaning in her trial. The comparative importance of scripture is reinforced through an appeal to fan knowledge: it is not until several episodes after 'May the Best Pet Win!' that Rainbow abandons her general disdain for reading, making it unlikely that she would have been secretly engaging with the Bible at this point in the series. The story explicitly addresses this issue by noting that whereas other books were for 'eggheads' (as reiterated by Rainbow in a later episode of the show), scripture 'wasn't like all those other egghead books. It was different'. The story thus remains firmly within established continuity and maintains the character of its

protagonist, while also incorporating a faith based element into the existing narrative (Unidostres 2013).

While fan fiction can explore gaps in existing episodes, it is more common for it to expand upon the show in some way. Such stories may still be placed within the series' canonical world, or alternatively use existing characters and settings to develop in new directions. These include alternate universe stories (which develop an alternative continuity or setting), crossovers (in which characters from another show appear in the *MLP:FiM* universe) and dark-fics (tragic stories which add violence, gore, and sometimes sex to the world of the show).⁹ Christian fan fiction can reflect all of these genres. Such stories can use the apparent absence of religion in Equestria to examine reactions to Christianity amongst the uninitiated. The first step in this process is often a period of confusion as religion is encountered for the first time. In ArtemistheSwordsman's 'The Word Became Ponified', Twilight's intellect is challenged when she encounters a Bible: "I don't know what it is. I can't figure out whether it's a novel, knowledge base, or reference. I can't tell if it's fiction or nonfiction"... As she flipped through the pages the stories got more incoherent and random.' (2012)

Having discovered the Bible, characters can be introduced to Christ. This introduction can often be light-hearted. In the humorous 'Fluttershy has Tea with Jesus', there is considerable confusion over the central character's identity – 'Okay, um, Jesus, I was just wondering. What are you?'. The answer manages to contain a good deal of theological depth despite its brevity: 'Physically man' (Retsamoreh 2012). Alternatively, an encounter with

⁹ The prevalence of dark-fics in *MLP:FiM* fan fiction may reflect an attempt to reimagine the show in a genre which is gendered masculine. For more on the gendering of dark-fics in wider fan fiction see Walliss 2012.

Christ can be more traumatic. Fluttershy's reading of the Gospel of John in 'The Word Became Ponified' results in a near breakdown:

'Jesus...' she muttered between sniffles, '...was put to death. [...] He never did anything wrong! And he never, ever would! But a bunch of officials beat him, imprisoned him, and killed him!' With each line, her passion grew and her eyes got mistier. By the end of her exclamation, she was fighting back bawling.

(ArtemistheSwordsman 2012)

These introductions of Jesus usually result in some form of epiphany that emphasises the character of Christ. Such awakenings can be on a small scale. In Retsamoreh's stories (2012a, 2012b) Jesus imparts the importance of friends and family respectively, combining a winning persona with honest criticism which helps to remake his hosts. Although humorous in tone, the stories present a positive picture of Jesus as a mysterious individual capable of accurately identifying (and solving) moral problems. While light comedies, they display a relatively high Christology that is a marked element of a number of recent parodies of Christianity (Clark 2012).

More commonly, an encounter with Jesus results in some form of conversion. In some stories, such as 'Word Became Ponified', the revelation leads to a sudden realisation of the importance of faith. Twilight's reading of John 3:16 results in 'an epiphany that exploded thoughts in her head like a nuclear warhead... He gave his only Son! And he did it to give eternal life to those that were good... "HE" loves the world!' (ArtemistheSwordsman 2012). In the first of Brian Jacko's 'Sisters in Christ' series, in which the 'Mane Six' form a

fellowship group, Fluttershy leads Applejack in the Evangelical ‘sinner’s prayer’: ‘Fluttershy began her prayer. “Dear Heavenly Father, I come before you this day, with repentance in my heart [...] Please forgive me [...] I accept your Son, Jesus Christ, as my Lord and Savior”’ (Jacko, 2013a).

In other stories authors use allegory to communicate the gospel narrative. In ‘Duskfall’, Celestia comes to an understanding of God that leads to an Evangelical-style conversion. Convicted of her sins as a despotic ruler, she is literally burned up by her depravity and convinced that justice requires her to die. A vision of ‘the author’ who sacrificed himself for his creation generates a radical conversion that means both acceptance of the sacrifice and a changed life:

He died instead of her, he died as her. He knew all about her and what she had done, but he gave everything for her... He was not letting her down gently. It was an otherworldly proposal. To take his life would link them in a way that she did not understand—but she did understand that it could not be undone. (Celestial Swordsman 2013)

In Servant Phoenix’s ‘The Element of Love’ (2012), the author constructs a detailed allegory in which fan knowledge plays a crucial role in the acceptance of a need for Christ. Twilight comes to a realisation that only the ‘pure’ can bear the Elements of Harmony – as in Evangelical soteriology, a single sin disqualifies an individual from a claim to righteousness. The ponies are initially defensive, certain that they have reached the required level of purity to be true bearers of the Elements. Yet as each in turn is visited by the minions of ‘Darkness’,

the central characters (and fan readers) are reminded of episodes in the series in which they failed to live up to the Element they bore. Fluttershy, as the Element of Kindness, hears lines from the series repeated back to her: excerpts of dialogue from season one's 'The Best Night Ever' (2011) (in which she displayed irrational anger towards animals who refused to cooperate with her) and season two's 'Putting Your Hoof Down' (2012) (in which assertiveness training caused her to develop a violent temper). Intertextually, the use of these lines acts as a method of demonstrating the nature of sin, as characters (and fan readers) are forced to confront the flaws which disqualify the ponies from being classified as 'pure' in the face of their denial.

As the characters come to realise their sin, they model conversion for the reader. The wrong approach is initially demonstrated by Twilight. Drawing intertextually on her position as a sceptic within *MLP:FiM*, she is frustrated as she demands that if 'Love' exists he appear to them physically. In contrast, it is Pinkie who models the correct approach:

'Element of Love,' started Pinkie Pie, 'I tried to be the pony who makes everypony laugh, but I failed. I failed so many times that I've lost count. Sometimes they just ignored me, sometimes I annoyed them, sometimes I even made them angry [...]' She closed her eyes. 'I'm so sorry. Please, forgive me, and make me somepony who can be called as the Spirit of Laughter.'

Small shining orbs flew into the castle through the windows to the front of Pinkie.

They gathered, becoming so shining, that nopony could watch it anymore.

'Pinkie Pie,' spoke somepony in the voice of a stallion, 'you are worthy to be called the Spirit of Laughter. Your sins are forgiven.' (Servant Phoenix 2012)

In contrasting Pinkie's reaction to that of Twilight, the author is able to draw upon existing fan knowledge of the show to further support the importance of faith to conversion – Twilight's insistence on 'physical proof' compared to Pinkie's willingness to look to the extra-physical was the subject of first season episode 'Feeling Pinkie Keen' (2011).

Another example can be found in DracoDei's 'Pony James Version' (2012). Here Equestria's history is reimagined in the style of the King James Version of the Bible. Christ is revealed in abstracted terms in which his sacrifice fits into the wider-mythos of *MLP:FiM*. Born as an earth pony, the author uses fan knowledge of 'cutie marks' (the distinguishing mark on a pony's rump demonstrating their special talent) to provide a theological rationale for Christ's mission:

...his cutie mark never appeared, for his true purpose was not yet acted upon. Brown was his coat, and cyan his eyes. And those who hated him killed him, for they could not bear his words rebuking them for their sins. And when he was dead, his cutie-mark appeared, and it was his hoof covering something, and all who looked upon it knew that what was under that hoof was too terrible to see.... But he did not remain dead, for Death greeted him, and bowed before him. (DracoDei 2012)

The author therefore draws on fan knowledge of the importance of the cutie mark in Equestrian society to explore the way in which Christ's sacrifice fulfils his mission and scriptural prophecy. The purpose, revealed only in his death, was the defeat of sin and death. Given that *MLP:FiM* establishes that gaining a cutie mark is an important rite of passage

(somewhat compatible to puberty), Christ's lack of mark works to further establish his humility.

Here, fan fiction is being used to examine particular theological questions and to set out a rationale and defence of Christian belief. Theological, and particularly soteriological, issues are consistently explored. 'Duskfall', for example, features a detailed discussion of the logic of substitutionary atonement. Celestia continually struggles to accept that anyone would be willing to sacrifice themselves for her sins. On trial for her crimes, she appeals to the 'author's' self-offering after hearing that 'No sacrifice is worth enduring HER!':

'It's too late to stop the substitution because he has already died'. She stifled sobs. 'If you really recognize his judgment, would you hold in contempt a sentence a higher court gave its life to carry out? Will you not honor him?' She shook her head and cried. 'It IS an outrageous substitution. I'm not worth his life! I... I didn't deserve this but—will you not honor him?'(Celestial Swordsman 2013)

A similar approach is taken in 'The Element of Love'. As was the case with the other central ponies, Twilight is convicted of sin through a reference to her failings in the series, in this case her initial decision to abandon her friends in season two opener 'The Return of Harmony' (2011). She is initially convinced that 'Love' is unable to forgive such a serious betrayal, but he assures her that he has secured forgiveness of any sin:

'I went directly to Darkness and offered myself in exchange for the bearers of Harmony... I gave up my glory and my powers and allowed him to torture me...But he could not keep me,' continued Love, and raised his head. 'Even if I offered myself

in exchange, I was innocent. On the third day, I got my powers back and freed myself from Darkness' prison. And since then, I am the one who decides who can be punished, and who can be forgiven.' (Servant Phoenix 2012)

As Saler argued (2011), imagined worlds act as spaces in which religious issues can be projected and discussed in these cases. As the above extracts suggest, these discussions are not simply evangelistic tracts, but instead offer a method of theological exploration and a means by which fans can address concerns about faith. In Zytharros' 'HIM' (2014), a dark-fic in which Twilight is the last creature in existence, the story finds her bitter at the death of family, friends, and the Universe. Floating in the Ether she meets 'Him', a being who seems to exist both before and beyond time: 'HIS form was white, with a mane made of light itself... HIS cutie mark was a trifold triangle...' In her anger over the suffering she has witnessed, Twilight appeals to God's sovereignty, only to be presented with a theodicy based around God's goodness: 'All things I create must come back to me of their own choice... If I do not present them with things that will challenge them in their resolve and do not present an alternative to MYSELF, then I could not honestly claim my creations to have chosen ME, and therefore could not call MYSELF good.' (Zytharros 2014).

In examining theological issues, fan work can seek to correct erroneous beliefs and poor exegesis while modelling Christian practice. In the fifth part of Brian Jacko's 'Sisters in Christ' series, Pinkie Pie misinterprets the scriptural command to engage in evangelism and becomes involved in increasingly offensive attempts to share the gospel (such as insulting a homosexual couple and accidentally promoting anti-Trinitarian heresy in an ill-advised theological debate). The story's conclusion sees Pinkie learning that she should use her gift of

laughter in evangelism, as she recalls Proverbs 17:22 and Job 8:21. Scripture is combined with godly advice from Rainbow in order to model good practice: ‘We need to tell others about the love of Christ, but even I need to remind myself to be gentle and kind about it, especially when I'm trying to show other ponies what sin is. We can't just shove religion down other ponies' throats...’ (Jacko 2013c).

Artwork represents another way for fans to combine fan knowledge with biblical exegesis. S1lkSpectre's ‘Fruits of the Spirit’ series illustrates the list of seven spiritual fruit in Galatians 5:22-23 with images from the show. The example chosen to symbolise ‘faith’ (2013a) shows Twilight Sparkle and Pinkie Pie laughing together while wearing umbrella hats. While this would mean little to the viewer unfamiliar with the show, for fans the image can immediately be located within the wider canon. In this case the image, taken from season one's ‘Feeling Pinkie Keen’ (2011), pictures the moment when Twilight has come to accept Pinkie's possession of extra-sensory powers by a ‘leap of faith’. The image models the sort of faith that Christians should display not through direct reference in visual media but by reference to fan knowledge. Likewise, the image for ‘peace’ features Fluttershy and Discord hand-in-hand from season three's ‘Keep Calm and Flutter On’ (2013). The picture is accompanied by a gloss: ‘Jesus told us to turn the other cheek; when Fluttershy answered Discord's actions with peace and friendship rather than fighting back, she redeemed him’ (2013b). A further example can be seen in Joelashimself's ‘Redeemer’ (2012), which features Jesus supporting a weeping Princess Luna in his arms. The accompanying text draws on fan knowledge: the first episodes of the show focused on Luna's redemption after spending a thousand years as the evil Nightmare Moon. Here the artist reminds fans of Luna's repentance, and the picture is accompanied by paraphrases of a number of verses from the gospels to communicate the completeness of Christ's forgiveness:

Does not a Shepard rejoice when a lost sheep returns?

How then can you ask if you are forgiven?

I love you, my child. It is good that you have come home. (Joelashimself 2012)

A similar pattern is discernable in the collection of biblical texts and images presented on the *MLP:FiM Bible* (<http://mlpbible.tumblr.com/>), in which an image from the show is used to provide an exegetical context for a scriptural verse. An image of Rarity and Pinkie confronting Fluttershy about her new-found over-assertiveness in ‘Putting your Hoof Down’ (2012) is thus combined with Matthew 18:15 on the importance of confronting other Christians who are guilty of sin. This logic means that fans creating these composite pieces are alert to the particular resonances of their image choice in terms of exegesis of both *MLP:FiM* and the biblical text. Thus a picture illustrating Romans 6:18 (‘Now you are free from the slavery of sin, and you have become slaves to righteous living’) was questioned due to its diegetic context – it showed Crystal Ponies enslaved by season three antagonist King Sombra, rather than the freedom of Christian living. Knowledge of the show thus combines with knowledge of the Bible to produce meaning through visual exegesis.

A final point to note about these fanworks relates to their location online. As Paul Booth has argued, fan fiction needs to be interpreted intratextually as well as intertextually. ‘Author’s notes’,¹⁰ links, and comments can serve to expand upon the text beyond the story itself (2010, 55-78; Coppa 2006, 242). These can be used to help provide readers with guidance when engaging with the stories. DracoDei comments that he initially wrote the ‘Pony James Version’ as a way of explaining ‘how I put a Christian underlay on MLP:FiM’

¹⁰ The term ‘Author’s Notes’ (or a/n) is used in fan fiction to denote comments an author provides with a story.

(2012). Mattias Unidostres provides a list of Bible verses as a reference and informs readers ‘So yes. My head cannon [*sic*] is that Rainbow Dash is a Christian’. This is combined with recognition of fandom as a space in which belief can be articulated in a non-confrontational manner: ‘you are all free to believe whatever you want to. I'd never force my beliefs on anyone. Regardless, God bless to you all’ (2013). The comments offered below each story, whether on blogs, *Deviant Art*, or fan fiction archives such as *FiMFiction.net* offer further opportunities for discussion. User comments on ‘HIM’, for example, evidence a mixture of praise for the story’s representation of God with comments that are more critical of religion designed to open up debate. The medium allows the author to provide additional commentary on the text, including the revelation that they prayed extensively while writing (Zytharros 2014).

Links can also be forged with other online media. For example, ‘Word Became Ponified’ features characters gathering around a camp fire to sing a song about friendship. While an Equestrian composition in text, the author’s note offers a link to a YouTube video of the original song: ‘My Friend’ by Christian rock band Nine Lashes. While the use of song lyrics in fan fiction is common, here the story potentially introduces the reader not only to theological speculation, but also to the world of Contemporary Christian Music (ArtemistheSwordsman 2012). At other times, fan works can conclude by including direct appeals for readers to convert. ‘Duskfall’ ends with a letter from the converted Celestia to Twilight, imploring her to accept the offer of life from ‘the Author of Harmony, the Prince of Peace. Some have known him as Jesus, Isa, or Cha’tan... Even if you could read this to

someone in another time and another world, it would be just as true for them as it is for us now.’(Celestial Swordsman 2013)¹¹

IV. Conclusion

This article has only been able to offer a snapshot of the range of practices that fans engage in as a way of incorporating their faith into their fandom. Rather than considering fandom as a rival or a surrogate form of religion, scholars of both religion and fandom should concentrate on the way in which contemporary believers use ‘cult’ media as part of their wider, often traditional, faith experience. This might initially appear to support elements of Stig Hjarvard’s ‘mediatization thesis’ that religion has become dependent on the logics of media in the western world (2011). But the fan works examined here demonstrate a reassertion of faith that combines a traditional understanding of belief with deep immersion in media fandom. Media texts are neither, to quote two dominant metaphors, ‘poached’ (Jenkins 2013) nor ‘baptised’ (Lyden 2003) – but used instead as a creative resource for theological engagement through a process of artistic engagement. Fandom, in providing a shared set of symbols, settings, and characters, offers fans tools that can be used for teaching religious literacy, engaging in theological speculation, and exploring scripture.

This synthesis can be reiterated through a final example. Brian Jacko’s ‘Putting My Idol on the Altar’ examines the way in which fandom might replace religion. Set in the ‘real’

¹¹ This replaces the original ending to the story: a metatextual interview in which the converted Celestia discussed the allegory with the author and clearly set out the path of salvation. Readers were offered a prayer of forgiveness to Christ, directions on finding a local church, and were invited to email the author directly with any questions.

world, God creates a living version of Rainbow Dash who, aware that love for *MLP:FiM* has usurped love for Christ for the protagonist, helps him construct an altar on which to sacrifice her: ‘You were unknowingly worshipping me and you lost focus of [*sic*] the Messiah, Jesus Christ... you were wasting much of your time being alone and watching My Little Pony Friendship is Magic episodes’. At the last minute, Jesus appears and freely elects to die in Rainbow’s place. With the sacrifice narrative revealed to have been a visionary dream, the protagonist awakens with a fresh perspective on God. The Lord has a mission for the author in which fandom is not replaced, but instead redeemed:

Jesus told me in my dream that He wanted me to be His shining light in this fandom, and I had no idea what he wanted me to do to be that shining light, but I humbly asked for His help to give me ideas.... I became struck with new ideas to tell stories that seemed to come from out of nowhere. I was never known for creativity, and I really had no desires to write before... I suddenly began to remember scriptures and I applied them to my story ideas as I typed them out.

Now that God was the focus of my life, I began to enjoy My Little Pony Friendship is Magic even more than I did before. I would find things that happened in the show and would think of scripture that relates to what happens in the stories. I could see the love of God in this show now, and I could practically feel His love for me through this cartoon. (Jacko 2013b)

To symbolise this shift, a Bible is placed at the centre of the protagonist’s *MLP* collection. Fandom and faith are no longer in conflict; instead fandom serves as one resource (among many others) to be used as part of the construction of faith identity.

A focus on the way in which orthodox believers make use of pop cultural resources would therefore allow a fuller and more nuanced understanding of the way in which religion

and popular culture work together. This article has been a case study of only one fandom, built around a text in *MLP:FiM* that might be thought to be unlikely to encourage religious speculation. Yet even in a relatively new fandom, Christian Bronies have produced an array of interesting works that engage in theological exploration and religious debate. Similar sorts of fanwork exists in other fandoms and an examination of *Doctor Who*, *Star Wars*, or *Star Trek* fandom would reveal similar religious explorations. This article has suggested a far deeper popular cultural engagement from younger believers, but not one that fundamentally transforms the nature of orthodox belief. Instead the relationship might be seen to work both ways: fans use their fandom as a way of interpreting and representing their belief while also reaching out and proselytizing within that fandom . Further work on this area will likely reveal an even more complex and fascinating matrix of connections than those uncovered here.

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