

**Please cite the Published Version**

Crome, Andrew (2019) Cosplay in the pulpit and ponies at prayer: Christian faith and lived religion in wider fan culture. *Culture and Religion*, 20 (2). pp. 129-150. ISSN 0143-8301

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/14755610.2019.1624268>

**Publisher:** Taylor & Francis (Routledge)

**Version:** Accepted Version

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**Cosplay in the Pulpit and Ponies at Prayer: Christian Faith and Lived Religion in  
Wider Fan Culture**

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## Cosplay in the Pulpit and Ponies at Prayer: Christian Faith and Lived Religion in Wider Fan Culture<sup>1</sup>

Word count: 7,967 words

### Abstract

This article examines the way in which Christian fans of popular media franchises have incorporated their fan identity into lived religious experience, producing religious fan works such as fan fiction, art, and fan-themed church services. Based around a series of interviews with fans in the United States and UK, both lay and clergy, it suggests the powerful affective connections forged through fandom, and examines the way in which fandom operates as a shared language to engage the wider fan community with theological ideas. Fans viewed their fandom as an arena through which God communicated and developed personal faith, working through fan texts and fan works to encourage and develop their connection to the divine. This article therefore challenges academic positions that see fandom as a secular replacement for religion, or as a form of blasphemous excess.

**Keywords:** Fandom, Lived religion, Popular culture, Religion and media, Evangelicalism

In September 2014, the popular Gawker blog site *Jezebel* made a startling discovery. Delving into the world of Harry Potter fan fiction, a reporter unearthed ‘Hogwarts School of Prayer and Miracles’, a story in which troubling allusions to witchcraft and the occult were stripped out and replaced with Christian references (Davies 2014). The author, ‘Grace Ann’, claimed that God had inspired her to create a version of the Potterverse that would be suitable for Christian parents to introduce to their children. A number of mainstream media outlets picked up the story, expressing various degrees of horror and disbelief. Although quickly revealed as a parody of right-wing US evangelicalism, media reports displayed unease at several elements common in fan fiction writing. The UK’s *Daily Mirror* objected to the rewriting of a beloved text (Gadd 2014), while the *Jezebel* piece complained that ‘Grace Ann’ reassigned

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Chris Deacy for his comments and suggestions on an earlier version of this article, and for helpful feedback from audiences at the Fan Studies Network and University of Manchester Religions and Theology Research Seminar.

characters to different Hogwarts houses to explore aspects of their personalities not addressed in the original novels (Davies 2014). Although used parodically here, fan re-writing, reimagination of characters, and writing marginal perspectives into the text have long been standard practices in fan fiction (Jenkins 2013, 152-184; Hellekson and Busse 2006). Mixing such practices with religion, however, appeared to have crossed the line of acceptability.

Although ‘Grace Ann’ was using Christian themes for parodic effect, there are numerous examples of religiously affiliated fans using their fandom to discuss and explore their faith identity. The aim of this article is to examine the way in which religion and fandom can overlap in contemporary Christianity. It is based primarily based upon a series of interviews conducted with self-identified fans who have engaged in the creation of Christian-themed fan works or religious services. Whereas much of the existing literature on the topic suggests that fandom serves as a secular replacement for religion or as a competitor to it, this article argues that fan identity is often incorporated in a non-problematic way into existing faith perspectives. Interviewees often viewed their entry into fandom as a way through which God developed their faith, and provided them with a platform and a language for sharing with others. In particular, the affective power of popular characters and media texts became a way to communicate complex theological concepts to other fans.

This article builds upon, and develops, concepts I originally explored in a 2014 *Culture and Religion* article on Christian fan works in *My Little Pony* fandom (Crome 2014). The earlier article focused upon analysing fan art and fan fiction, examining the way in which character traits were used to communicate theological ideas and promote religious literacy in a particular fandom. Although I develop these ideas here (particularly the way in which fandom can serve as a type of ‘third language’ for communicating faith to those unfamiliar with religion), the present piece also focuses on how fans understand their use of these concepts within their wider religious life worlds, and how they incorporate fandom into a range of

lived religious practices. This article presumes no familiarity with my earlier work in *Culture and Religion*, although readers interested in examples from fan works, and more detail on the development of *My Little Pony* fandom, will (hopefully) find that the earlier article complements the current piece.

### **Religion and Fandom**

Research on the interaction between fandom and religion has often focused on the supposed incompatibility between the two. A number of studies have highlighted the way in which fandom can be seen as a form of idolatry in monotheistic faiths. For example, Erika Doss's work on Elvis fans (1999) suggested that fandom was a potentially blasphemous excess in which love for Elvis vied with devotion to God. Similarly Maltby et al., conducting a study of links between religiosity and celebrity fandom in Britain, found that individuals who self-identified as highly religious avoided celebrity fandom as a form of idolatry (2002, 1160). Iver B. Neumann (2006) characterised Evangelical opposition to Harry Potter as the reaction of an established faith to a new religious rival. Within some Christian groups, 'fan' has become a pejorative term, used to differentiate those with a superficial engagement to their faith from 'true believers'. The Christian website and devotional study series 'Not a Fan' therefore distinguishes between a fan as an 'enthusiastic admirer' of Jesus and a true Christian as a 'completely committed follower' (notafan.com 2019).

Along with the suggestion that fandom might be problematic within a Christian context, some studies have claimed that fandom functions as a form of secular religion, replacing traditional religious belief. Some new religious groups have emerged from the world of popular culture. Movements such as Jediism or the Church of All Worlds can be described as "invented" (Cusack 2013), 'hyper-real' (Possamai 2005), or 'fiction-based' (Davidsen 2013) religions, as they find their key inspiration in fictional works. However, these groups can be differentiated

from fandom in that where fans often treat the objects of their fandom as if they were real, they do not view them as the basis for ontological belief (Davidsen 2013, 389; Coleman 2017, 381). Moving beyond these self-identified religious groups, some studies have suggested a functional equivalence between fandom and religion. Employing a functionalist definition, Jennifer Otter Bickerdike (2016) has argued that fandom serves as a new form of religion, providing a framework for meaning making and dealing with personal crises in a secularising world. Her work draws on structural similarities surrounding fan ritual, pilgrimage and meaning making in order to establish this connection. This builds on a number of studies of the religious functions of popular culture fandoms. Michael Jindra's foundational research on *Star Trek* fandom (1994) argued that it paralleled organised religion, becoming a form of civil religion in and of itself. More recent research by Jennifer Porter (2009) and Laura Ammon (2014) has supported these findings. Similarly, Yonah Ringelstein's study of *Hunger Games* fans (2013) suggested that in an increasingly secularised West, fandom now fulfils many of the functions formerly performed by religion. This is particularly evident in providing community connections, a sense of the sacred, and ritualised practices connected to transcendence. Pavol Kosnáč, drawing on Thomas Luckmann's work, makes a similar point. The fan community is 'implicitly religious... provid[ing] psychological, communitarian and ritualistic services that religions commonly provide' (Kosnáč 2017, 91-92). In a recent edited volume, Carole M. Cusack and Venetia Laura Delano Robertson therefore argue that fandom should be seen as an authentic site for encounters with the sacred (2019).

While these studies suggest valuable avenues for research, they are nonetheless problematic, especially when considering fans who actively identify with particular religious traditions. Comparisons between religion and fandom have a tendency towards what Sean McCloud describes as 'parallelomania' in discovering (often arbitrary) similarities between religion and popular culture (2003, 191), as well as dismissing fans' own denials of the religiosity of their

fandom (Crome 2014). Fans do sometimes make use of religious language to explain their connection to their fan object (e.g. a ‘conversion’ to a fandom), but these terms are used playfully. They are representative of the continued importance of religious language as a metaphor for intense emotional experiences in western society (Cavicchi 1998, 51-57; Duffett 2015, 185). There is therefore little reason for assuming that fandom, whether of an individual or a franchise, is necessarily antithetical to religious belief and practice, either as an idolatrous indulgence or as a new rival. Maltby et al.’s suggestion that ‘many religious persons either ignore’ the biblical prohibition on idolatry ‘or fail to perceive that celebrity worship is actually a violation of that teaching’ presumes a tension that need not exist (Maltby et al. 2002, 1169-1170). As Kathryn Lofton has argued (2018), teachings of divine transcendence rooted in both Greek philosophy and the Abrahamic faiths mean that it is unlikely that religious fans would worry about accidentally replacing their deity with a celebrity figure or media franchise. The idea that fans literally worship the objects of their fandom links back to pathologising traditions of fan scholarship, in which fans’ ‘obsessions’ lead to a breakdown in their ability to differentiate between reality and fictional worlds (Duffett 2015, 189-190). Studies that position fandom as replacing religion therefore often inadvertently set up a problematic dichotomy between fandom and faith. In contrast to this assumed opposition, fandom can be interpreted as one of multiple arenas of identity construction (national identity, familial identity etc.) through which religious identity is expressed (Ammerman 2014, 194-196; Sandvoss 2005, 62-63; Abraham 2017, 117).

Compared to research on fandom *as* religion, there has been comparatively little academic interest in how fans within existing faith traditions combine their belief and fan practice.<sup>2</sup>

This article suggests that, for some Christian fans, fandom is neither a mundane part of their lives, nor a potential replacement of their faith. Instead, fandom represents a conduit for the

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<sup>2</sup> Juli L. Gittinger’s recent work on cosplay by Muslim women (2018, 2019) is a notable exception.

divine to intensify that faith and communicate it to others. Their fandom is a part of their wider religious identity, with their roles as fans and participants in particular religious traditions often overlapping, rather than contradicting. As Amy Frykholm's study of *Left Behind* readers in Evangelical communities suggested the importance of Christian popular culture in developing individuals' faith (2004), so I suggest that 'secular' popular culture can also be adapted to this role.

Much of the scholarship on religion and media has concentrated on the response of religious organisations to a variety of media forms. However, in recent years there has been an increasing shift away from focusing upon official beliefs and reactions to looking at how individuals have lived out their faith. The paradigm of 'lived' or 'everyday' religion examines not primarily what religious practitioners believe, but how they live out their faith in their day-to-day lives – 'concrete ways of engaging their bodies and emotions in being religious' (McGuire 2008, 209). As Stewart Hoover has pointed out, media can become a form of symbolic spiritual inventory that can form a core part of an individual's religious worldview (2006, 55-56). Work by Danielle Kirby (2013), Curtis Coats and Monica Emerich (2016) has therefore concentrated on the way in which individuals have used media to create a religious or spiritual identity moulded in part by their media usage. While this work has been helpful, at times it has been overly focused on the individual and their personal understanding at the expense of looking at the way in which media use is filtered through the norms of a faith community and belief system (Primano 1995, 44-46). Looking at how Christians have used media, and their involvement in fandom as an expression of faith identity, reveals a usage which is neither institutionally controlled, nor a totally free bricolage, but rather the combination of fan identity with a belief governed by scripture, church community, and historic creeds. This approach has some similarities with Kenneth Loomis's study of Evangelical university students, in which he concluded that young Christians



‘manipulated the media content to serve their own purposes and in many cases used the media in ways that supported, and sometimes enhanced, their preconceived ideas’ (Loomis 2004, 162). However, his emphasis on a uses and gratifications approach to media led him to place too great an emphasis on Christian media use as specifically ‘goal directed’. The approach adopted here does not view Christian engagement with fandom as an intentional attempt to manipulate media, or to impose a Christian message upon it. Christian fandom instead represents a genuine affective engagement with the fan text, interpreted as a God-given arena in which the individual might express her own belief.

### **Methodology**

The core of this article is based upon twelve semi-structured interviews with individuals engaged in activities linking their faith and fandom. These include writing fan fiction, producing Bible studies based on popular culture, and organising services based around fan properties. Interviewees were invited to participate after Christian fan art, fan fiction, videos, or services were identified via online platforms and fan hubs. Interviews were conducted via Skype, or in person at fan conventions, and coded and analysed for overlapping themes. Pseudonyms have been used throughout.

The majority of interviewees were male (10) and based in the United States (9). Two interviewees were located in the UK, and another in Canada. Ages ranged from the early twenties to the mid-fifties. Three were in full-time Christian ministry, and one was a seminarian. They represented a range of Christian denominations, including Methodist, Church of England, Episcopalian (US), Catholic and non-denominational Christian. Although interviewees were often active in several fandoms, the majority identified as

‘bronies’ (adult fans of the cartoon *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*)<sup>3</sup> or as *Doctor Who*<sup>4</sup> fans. The faith-based activities they engaged in within their respective fandoms varied. These included the organisation of *Doctor Who* liturgies and worship services; Tumblr blogs dedicated to illustrating Bible verses with screencaps from *My Little Pony*; Bible studies dedicated to themes within particular episodes, and fan fiction that involved Christian elements – whether the Doctor defeating a Dalek invasion through interfaith dialogue, or Jesus visiting ponies in their homeland of Equestria. These fandoms were chosen due to the productivity of fans, my previous research with both fan groups (e.g. Crome 2014, 2018), and personal position as a fan of both *My Little Pony* and *Doctor Who*.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to recognise that while this article focuses on Christian fanworks, the fans interviewed here participated in a range of fandom activities and did not limit themselves to the production of faith-based fanworks. Alongside the Christian material, most produced general stories, artwork, or commentary, and took part in online forums or offline meet-ups where faith may or not be part of a wider conversation. As one fan noted, tongue in cheek, ‘there are other stories I write too. Not everything I write is “Look at this: Bible, Bible, Bible!”’

Given the very limited sample size, the article makes no claims to be statistically representative, or to make statements that would be universally applicable to Christian fans.

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<sup>3</sup> The term ‘brony’ is a portmanteau of ‘bros’ and ‘ponies’. Some female fans identify as ‘pegasisters’, although ‘brony’ is generally now used to refer to fans of all genders. For more on the background and gendering of the term see Gilbert 2015.

<sup>4</sup> For readers unfamiliar with these shows, a very brief overview of their key concepts will be useful in understanding fan responses discussed below. *Doctor Who* (1963-1989, 1996, 2005-present) is a British science fiction show, in which an alien Time Lord named The Doctor travels time and space with human companions. The character can ‘regenerate’, changing faces, gender, and personality quirks, and has been played by thirteen different actors within the main series. In subsequent interviews fans therefore refer to the ‘Tenth Doctor’ or ‘Eleventh Doctor’ to differentiate particular incarnations.

*My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (2010-2019) is a children’s cartoon that attracted an unexpected adult fanbase. The show is based in the magical land of Equestria, and generally focuses on six major characters: Twilight Sparkle, Rainbow Dash, Applejack, Rarity, Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the challenges and advantages of writing about fandoms one is a member of, as an ‘aca-fan’ (an academic and a fan), see Brooker, Duffett and Hellekson 2017, 63-65.

Instead, it aims to offer some preliminary insights into the way in which contemporary fan practices work within a broad range of Christian traditions. It therefore intends to act as the foundation for wider research into fandom and religion, and suggest ways in which scholars working on religion, media, and lived religion might consider different ways of incorporating fan culture into their research. The small sample size need not be a problem, particularly when conducting a preliminary study. Using Grounded Theory, Guest et al have suggested that data saturation usually occurs within twelve interviews, and key metathemes present within as few as six (Guest et al. 2006; Brembourg 2014). The interviews here therefore identify key themes that might guide future research design and interview coding.

### **Affective Connection, Character, and Religious Literacy**

Although it has been under-researched, the idea that fans bring religious ideas to the object of their fandom is consistent with key theories of fandom. Cornel Sandvoss has argued that the texts that fandoms develop around, or ‘fan object’, are ‘polysemic’, in that they are open to the widest possible range of readings to allow fans to find their own identity within them. The fan object then serves as a projection of the fan’s existing beliefs and suppositions, but one which also acts as a mirror to show fans where they fail to live up to those beliefs. It therefore serves as an idealised mirror of the self. In this sense, the fan object might go beyond being polysemic into what Sandvoss describes as ‘neutrosemic’ and having no intrinsic meaning (2005, 95-152). Applied to religion, the fan of faith would therefore find their religion represented within their fan object in an idealised form. Lynn Schofield Clark has examined discussions of religion among *Lost* fans through this lens (2007). This revealed the way in which fans of different faiths were able to find allegorical references to their belief within the broader story world and use this as the basis for discussion within their fandom.

Given this, it is unsurprising to find examples of faith appearing within fandoms. However, when Christian fandom has briefly appeared in public consciousness, it has often been portrayed as problematic. Writing about Christian identity within punk subcultures, Ibrahim Abraham notes the common conception of Christian punks as ‘comical or contradictory figures’ (2017, 28). The same has been true in the limited public exposure of Christian fanworks. For example, a 2014 article on internet humour website *Cracked* included a feature on *Sonic the Hedgehog* Christian fan art that concluded it was ‘so over-the-top that it has to be a joke...[but] so shitty that it must be sincere’ (Prada 2014). Sonic is just one of many fandoms with active Christian fans. Popular online repository *FanFiction.net*, for example, hosts Christian communities for specific fandoms (including Sonic and Pokémon), as well as general community sites for Christian stories crossing franchises including *X-Men* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. These stories can operate as ways to explore faith issues, introduce complex theology, or serve an evangelistic purpose (Crome 2014). Although this juxtaposition of popular culture and sincere religiosity might initially appear bizarre, in reality it can serve as a practical way to communicate religious identity while simultaneously proclaiming one’s position as a genuine fan and serving as a rallying point for other fans of faith. Fans often experience intense affective connections with characters within a fandom (Pugh 2005, 67; Coppa 2006; Wilson 2016). Placing these characters in faith-based situations therefore draws upon a fan’s pre-existing connection to character as a shorthand way of communicating religious concepts, as well as providing a space (through online comments features) for other fans to follow suit. An image of Sonic praying on a repository such as *Deviant Art*, for example, allows the artist to develop the fan audience’s existing affective connection with the character along with proclaiming their individual faith identity. Comments below the image offer the opportunity for debate, but also for support for other Christian fans who feel encouraged to reveal their beliefs in response to the image. Good

quality art allows the fan artist to gain social capital within the fan community, as even critical fans appreciate the aesthetic qualities of the piece. At the same time, the artwork affirms that faith and fandom need not clash as the fandom's central figure is shown praying 'to Jesus for strength to continue doing what he does' (Called1-for-Jesus 2011).

The importance of affective connection to characters provides a crucial link between faith and fandom. As James Trammell noted when writing about Christian film criticism (2012), Christian viewers are primed to expect affective and transformative engagements with texts. This has sometimes manifested as fear: as many Christians, particularly Evangelicals, have encountered a transformative mediated experience through the Bible and the preached word, it is perhaps unsurprising that they have developed an historical concern relating to contagion from media. At the same time, from Reformation use of popular folk tunes to eighteenth-century adaptations of theatrical techniques in preaching, Christians have also engaged with the cultural and media tools available to them. While this has often led to the creation of parallel media forms, representing subcultural reappropriations of more mainstream media (such as Contemporary Christian Music [CCM]) media fandom can also be incorporated within a broader Christian identity. Church practices that teach individuals to expect transformative engagement with media, the importance of affective communities, a belief in God's presence in all areas of life, and the creative remixing of Bible stories in youth groups, sermons and Sunday School, may in fact offer young Christians an early introduction to the same emotions and creative techniques seen in fandom. For these Christians, fandom is not therefore in opposition to their religion, but part of their wider faith world.

This was evidenced in the way that fans emphasised the affective engagement encouraged within fandom: 'the fact that there is a lot of empathy and emotional openness [in Pony fandom]' suggested one fanfic author, 'means that some people are really prepped and ready to receive, like, God's love.' Emotional intensity marked by links to the fan object could

therefore open up connections to the divine. A minister from the north of England who had organised *Doctor Who* based liturgies, recalled the experience of replacing the Apostle's Creed with quotations from the show. Describing the awe and mystery of the Doctor, she recalled:

...the bit where that [sighs] emotional thing went round the room, that, that, feeling of 'Wait a minute this is powerful. This means something. This is what I want to give – I can give myself to this, what I know to this' was when we started reading the creed... People were in all sorts of emotional places and the...the... I wish I knew words for this, my vocabulary isn't good enough, but there was a sort of, a frisson, something went through the air as we said that creed together.

The language of this new creed, simultaneously about the Doctor and God, conflated the affective power of the show with the affective power of the spiritual setting in order to tie these experiences together. A Methodist minister in the Southern US reported similar experiences when delivering a four sermon series on *Doctor Who* (while dressed as Matt Smith's Eleventh Doctor). As in a convention or theme park, the congregation physically altered parts of the church in order to foster a sense of a transformation of space. Worshippers repainted the entrance of the sanctuary to represent the doors of the TARDIS, the Doctor's time machine: 'so actually when you entered into the room it looked bigger on the inside'.<sup>6</sup> In this way, the sacred space was altered to have a dual function. On the one hand, it remained the central worship space of the church, replete with the affective traces of the normal activities conducted there (memories of sermons, baptisms, experiences of God through communion and so on). At the same time, the *Doctor Who* fan also experienced the service as

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<sup>6</sup> The TARDIS is shaped like a 1950s London Police Box on the outside, but due to dimensional engineering, is literally 'bigger on the inside'.

an entrance into the world of the text – an important part of the appeal of fan pilgrimages to filming sites (Bickerdike 2016, 24-46) and themed attractions (Garner 2016).

Discussion of specific *Doctor Who* episodes again operated as way of allowing congregants to discuss personal issues through the lens of popular culture. One of the episodes the congregation viewed, ‘Vincent and the Doctor’ (2011), dealt with Vincent van Gogh’s battle against depression within a science fiction context. The episode: ‘gave a lots of folks, erm, permission, so to speak, to talk about their own depression, or if they had a family member who was suffering with depression... it was very practical for them’. For the minister, the combination of his fandom and faith represented an incarnational engagement with culture, as God’s word took on flesh within a fannish context: ‘Fandom and Christianity is, is – again I think it goes down to, boils down to the incarnation; of the church learning a new language in order to share the gospel, because that seems to be what Jesus is doing in the gospel itself.’

Ellen Moore has cautioned that reliance on media in worship builds on commercial logic, inviting churchgoers ‘into a consumerist identity, one that highlights individual needs and personal choice’ (2013, 257). However, for existing fans, the use of fan culture within worship has very different connotations to individual consumption. Fans who combine their experience of a text with the formation of affective community and creativity are likely to draw these affective connections from the worship rather than link media to consumerism. As Jaköb Lofgren’s recent work on the use of popular culture themed *Lambatha* Easter candles in Orthodox cultures has suggested, the affective connection of fandom enhances the emotional content of worship in making it more meaningful to the individual worshipper (2018, 59). As expressed passionately by the minister who organised the *Doctor Who* liturgy:

...when you're a fan of *Who* or *Star Trek* or whatever it's *your* language. You know, it's not Latin or Greek or Aramaic, it's not what the Bible is written in, it's what *you* express your soul in, erm... And [Laughs] if you ever go on any of the *Doctor Who* sites and read some of the comments on the forums and things, people get *incredibly* worked up about it because it's the language of meaning with which they have shaped their lives [...] Somebody said just today on one of the sites 'it was my emotional anchor in a stormy couple of years.' Now when, erm, a meaning language is as important to you as that, and someone allows you to use that language to express your faith in God who is real, then something happens.

In this way, the affective language of fandom makes worship both more meaningful to the individual, and allows complex theology to be communicated in a communal shorthand that makes it accessible to non-Christian fans. Brett, a programmer in his early-twenties based in the American South, therefore wrote a story involving Jesus highlighting particular sins through engagement with the main *My Little Pony* characters. He used the character of Rainbow Dash, a boisterous pony susceptible to egotism, to explore the nature of pride and contrast it to Christ's humility in the incarnation. Fans' existing affective connection to Rainbow Dash, as one of the most popular characters within the fandom, therefore gave added emotive weight to her conversion, and its wider meaning. In this way, fandom can operate as what Abraham, drawing on Moltmann, described as 'a third language', external to both believer and non-believer allowing communication across contexts (2017, 80). Given the diminution of religious literacy in wider culture (Prothero 2007), using fandom as a way of introducing theological concepts is understandable. As Eugene Gallagher notes in his critique of Prothero's treatment of religious literacy as reducing the concept to facts about religion, true religious literacy involves 'insight into how people use that basic information to orient themselves in the world, express their individual and communal self-understanding and



give their lives direction and meaning' (2009, 208). The interactive nature of fandom, in which discussion is encouraged between authors and readers (Pugh 2005, 242) also allows for those sceptical about faith to learn first-hand about how religion fits into individuals' lifeworlds, helping to build this wider sense of religious literacy.

Although this affective connection with characters offered a way for fans to share the importance of their faith with others in their fandom, it could also raise issues. Abbey, an Evangelical in her early thirties living in the Eastern US, was inspired to start a blog illustrating Bible passages with *My Little Pony* screencaps. She noted fierce disagreements relating to some of the pictures she chose. By illustrating a biblical verse with a picture of two female ponies commonly 'shipped' in fandom,<sup>7</sup> she inadvertently began an angry debate on homosexuality and faith. Here fan knowledge and affective connection, particularly the popular fandom pairing of two ponies in a lesbian relationship, undermined the faith message that the verse and picture combination attempted to illustrate. This suggests that while fandom can operate as a powerful conduit for affective expressions of faith and communicating religious ideas, conflict can arise when religious ideas appear to challenge widely held fan interpretations of characters.

### **Incorporating Faith and Fandom**

Work on fandom and faith as potential rivals (e.g. Doss 1999, Neumann 2006) suggests that some Christian fans might be uncomfortable with their fandom. Lynn Schofield Clark has noted that some Christians struggled to justify their media usage, seeing it as a distraction from spiritual activities (2003, 148-154). At times, interviewees showed some evidence of this discomfort, either from themselves or from fellow believers they encountered. One minister vividly recalled an instance when a 78-year-old woman broke down in tears after she

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<sup>7</sup> "Shipping" in fan culture refers to placing two characters in a romantic or sexual relationship.

had delivered a sermon based around *Star Trek*: ‘she threw her arms around me, weeping, saying “I’ve always heard God in *Star Trek*, and no-one else has ever given me permission to”’. Abraham has highlighted that Evangelicals involved in subcultures such as punk or surfing often faced a crisis point at which their interest threatens to become an ‘idol’ that dethrones God. However, rather than abandon their activity, after a ‘ritual of rupture’ whereby they temporarily disassociated from their activity, most returned and sacralised their leisure pursuit ‘as worship or as a form of ministry’ (Abraham 2017, 128). Some elements of this were visible in fandom, as fans justified their engagement with the text through sacralising it. This often resembled Ellen E. Moore’s interviews with Evangelical pastors who desired to ‘redeem’ media (2013, 255). As Tom, an American youth pastor who produced Pony based bible studies noted: ‘It’s not about us killing time. It’s about making use of the time ...the ministry, in a sense, is just giving people that option, to say: “Oh, *My Little Pony* isn’t just a waste of time – it’s a use of it”.’ Similarly, the Methodist pastor noted that he didn’t ‘show *Doctor Who* in the church because I think *Doctor Who* is the best show on television, it’s to show that this actually does have substance... we can give that a new, and redemptive meaning, when we, when we use it in terms of a sacred function.’ While there was little evidence of the ‘rituals of rupture’ Abraham discussed in fandom, Chris, a UK software engineer in his mid-twenties, admitted to believing at one point that God had judged him for his involvement in Pony fandom: ‘[I] felt like lonely and excluded, and I was thinking, I kind of tried to like project it on God, like maybe God is abandoning me because I’m a Brony and stuff.’ For Chris, this problem was not resolved through disassociating from fandom, but rather through fan content itself. Browsing pony music videos (PMVs)<sup>8</sup> on YouTube, he recalled that ‘one of the PMVs actually had a Christian song under it, which literally had the message: “Even if you can’t... Even if you can’t bring me anything then I

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<sup>8</sup> PMVs are short clips of *My Little Pony* edited together to form a new video for popular song. The term developed from AMVs, or anime music videos.

still don't look down on you and love you". And I could only hear that because I was watching PMVs.' The concern that fandom might replace God was therefore worked through in his later Christian stories, which responded to popular fanfics that suggested 'that you need ponies to be like, have a full life. Which, like, is a nice thing to have, [but] I didn't feel it to be complete.' His stories therefore saw the characters find Jesus, and learn that only through faith could they experience life in all its fullness. God affirmed his fandom, and equipped him with the ability to minister to others within it.

While it would be easy to see this as a rationalisation of fandom within a potentially hostile faith environment, this is to over-simplify Christian use of media. Studies of lived religion recognise that the distinction between the sacred and profane is fluid. The whole of an individual's lifeworld becomes an arena for spiritual activity (McGuire 2008, 77-82; Ammerman 2014, 195-197). For Christian fans, their fandom operates as a part of their belief system, offering a way of both receiving blessing from God, and of performing faith identity. As Chris noted, 'during my life I've actually experienced God can really use anything, including ponies'. Many fans therefore argued that God had explicitly worked through their fandom. Abbey was inspired to start her blog 'Because I'd watched episodes of *My Little Pony* and gone "Ah, that's so biblically aligned!" and just wanted to share that with someone'. Tom recalled that he overcame his initial confusion at enjoying the cartoon by realising 'the reason why I enjoyed it was that I saw that little spark of divinity. I noticed in every episode there was a very clear, a very... almost audible message that could be spoken to me, saying "That applies to God's Word! That applies to the Bible!"' For some fans this went beyond finding biblical echoes in the show. Instead, their fandom became a direct arena through which God worked to transform them. As Craig, an office worker in his mid-thirties based in the US South West, discussed the relationship between his faith and his fandom, he connected the show with his personal religious experience:

*My Little Pony* has gotten me out of depression, out of Asperger's Syndrome's most onerous symptoms... I do believe that I was touched by the Holy Spirit back in 1997, 1996, when Jesus showed me that his love for me is real, and is saving. Something that I cling to, even in the darkest times. And, which I compare the experience I had, both with the experience Luna and Sunset Shimmer<sup>9</sup> had when wrapped in the rainbow of the Elements of Harmony.

For Craig, the 'Elements of Harmony' – the six key characteristics of friendship in the Pony universe – were 'a tool God has given us to diagnose friendship problems'. In both Christian fanwork and in interviews, fans often associated the elements with the 'fruits of the Spirit'. As Brett noted, 'the Elements of Harmony, you know, they already resemble Fruits of the Spirit'. Craig continued that comparison, by using a reference to God's presence often found in Pentecostal Christianity: 'I've been touched by the Elements of Harmony aka the Seven Spirits of God'.

In these descriptions, God's spirit worked actively through an individual's fannish engagement with the text in order to transform them. Tom vividly recalled a theatrical viewing of *My Little Pony* spin-off movie *Equestria Girls: Rainbow Rocks* through which he had encountered God. After joking about the somewhat incongruous idea of attending a screening of a children's film with open notepad and Bible, the concluding scenes of the movie, in which the antagonists were publicly defeated through the power of music and friendship, deeply affected him:

And I'm just like 'Oh my gosh, Colossians 2 – he's not only disarmed principalities, but he's made a public spectacle of them!' ... I was almost just celebrating to God: 'Thank you for speaking that so amazingly. Not only being reminded of what your

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<sup>9</sup> Princess Luna and Sunset Shimmer were both originally villains who experienced redemption through friendship, and have become fan favourite characters.

Word says, but what it means and how it applies to me.’ My most favourite study, my most favourite episode/movie of *My Little Pony* would have to be that. Not because of how fun the songs were – though they were very well-executed. Not because the story was so well-written – though they did a great job. But because the message of God spoke so freely, so powerfully, and so magnificently to me personally in just getting to celebrate: ‘Yes God, you have taken away the power of sin and death! Yes God, you have disarmed principalities! Yes, you do delight in the worship and singing of your people!’

Here the fan object served to remind Tom of a key verse proclaiming Christ’s victory and supremacy over all creation. It became the carrier of divine meaning; the tool God used to speak directly into his life. His experience resembles what Marc Joly-Corcoran describes as a ‘cinephany’; the intense emotional experience a fan encounters in an initial engagement with their fan text (2019). Significantly, however, whereas the *Star Wars* fans Joly-Corcoran examined channelled their affective experiences into greater fan productivity, Craig engaged in both creative response and worship of God outside of the text. While the text had power, he was clear that this was dependent upon God. Although some studies have suggested a fear of slippage between fact and fiction in Evangelical Christianity (Clark 2003, 140-148; Neumann 2006, 92-94), as in Loomis’ work with Evangelical students, there was a clear awareness of the boundaries between the fictional world and God’s activity through it (2004, 162). As Tom argued, ‘*My Little Pony* was able to open a door, but I’m also aware that it wasn’t *My Little Pony* that did that, but the Holy Spirit. *My Little Pony* was just the medium he used’.

As well as experiencing God working through their fan object on a personal level, fans expressed the greatest pleasures when discussing ways in which God had used their work to bless others. Abbey recounted that her blog encouraged shared faith activity. This ranged

from mundane prayer requests ‘All the way to having somebody say “Your blog has made me read the Bible more, and I’m recommitting myself to Christ”. I mean, those are the moments that just uplift me so much.’ The majority of interviewees expressed surprise at the positive responses they received, but valued those which credited their work with developing faith as the most important. Sam, a 22-year old graduate from the central US, noted that one reader ‘sent me like this long message on how that story, he believed (and I believe too), that God had used that story to reach him; to give him more faith. And I’m like “My God, that’s beautiful! That’s incredible!” That I could be used in such a way to help inspire people in the most odd of ways!’

Fans therefore often engaged in writing Christian fanfics as a form of evangelism within the fan community. Some felt specially called to minister in these communities. Using theoretical models of religion operating within the marketplace, Abraham suggested that Evangelical ministries to specific subcultures were unsurprising as ‘religion is obliged to meet people on their own cultural terrain’ (Abraham 2017, 30). Tom conceived his video studies in exactly this way: ‘We have an outreach to Muslims; we have an outreach to Jehovah’s Witnesses. And in a sense [my ministry] is just our outreach to Bronies. They are no different.’ Gary, an animator from the Southern US in his mid-20s, saw his entry into Pony fandom as a form of calling. This viewed God as a fellow fan, further emphasising the incarnational aspects of Christian usage of popular culture mentioned above: ‘it seems like me and God have been in it together. So it seems almost as if we both made that decision to become Bronies to reach out to Bronies.’

Although some research has suggested that Christian interpretations of popular culture have tried to shut down the polysemic nature of fan texts by removing ambiguous meanings (Creasman 2013), interviewees were careful to avoid offence by claiming their fan object for Christianity. As Heather Hendershot noted in her work on Christian media, Evangelical

productions generally aim at subtlety and sensitive seed planting, rather than open calls for conversion (2004, 64-75; Detweiler 2013). Fans criticised media that was too blatant in its evangelical purpose. As one fan noted, ‘It’s not like going to be like “Oh I read a pony fan fiction, oh I give my life to Jesus!”’ Mark, a Canadian brony in his early-30s, stated that he wrote Christian fan fiction because ‘I wanted to challenge myself to writing [*sic*] something that didn’t come off as too preachy [...] I want to see if it’s all, all going to be great or if I’m just going to be slamming people over the head with my Bible and saying “Believe! Believe! Believe! Believe!”’ Sam remarked that:

I believe in subtlety. And, you know, you’re going to get a lot of Christians that don’t. And they think that, you know, if you’re subtle about your faith, then you’re ashamed about it or something. No, that’s not the case at all. I just appreciate undertones and that they can be interpreted different ways at different times in life.

He gave the example of a story in which Rainbow Dash experiences a late night crisis over the direction of her life, before becoming suddenly calmed: ‘when I wrote that I was thinking “OK, God’s Spirit is coming to calm her and cure her anxiety for the moment”. But someone else might say that she had a sudden epiphany of positive thinking[...] there’s a bit of flexibility that comes with it’. Other authors complained that Christian fan fiction they had previously encountered was used as ‘some license to make the plot half-baked’ and an excuse to have characters ‘sit down and listen to a sermon for a good long bit.’

Interviewees therefore tended to be critical of explicitly Christian media, condemning movies such as *God’s Not Dead* or novels like *Left Behind* for their vitriolic approach to non-Christians: ‘it just comes across in all the wrong ways, even if it’s well-intentioned’. As one minister noted ‘[some] folks who are suspicious of culture; they think “Well, if you want to read comic books then let’s write Jesus-themed comic books and have a space in the church

in which to do it”. And I think that misses the mark’. David, a US-based Episcopalian seminarian in his early 20s, therefore wrote a story about a non-Christian pony experiencing a High-Church Anglican service as a response to what he saw as too many ‘preachy’ Christian stories. Rather than press for an Evangelical commitment to Christ, his story ‘was based around the aesthetic of the experience... I was kind of hoping that the readers would be able to look at it in a new way, or for those who weren’t familiar with liturgy, to be able to look at it with open eyes.’

Fan authors were also deeply aware that non-Christians might find their stories offensive. Craig, who had written a ‘Jesus in Equestria’ story (in which Jesus appears in the world of *My Little Pony*) included a ‘trigger warning’ for ‘Blatant Christianity’. Sam, who wrote in the same subgenre, recalled that while his usual approach to faith was to write allegorically, he decided, ‘I’m like “You know what? Screw it! I’m going to write something that I like, and I think might please God!”’ Most authors, however, tended to adopt a more subtle approach, using allusion and allegory and often avoiding direct references to Jesus until towards the end of the story. Several fans cited C.S. Lewis and the Narnia stories as an inspiration for their work. Gary spoke admiringly about the way in which Lewis’s stories were saturated with Jesus’s presence without being preachy. Christ, he noted, ‘overwhelmed’ the story, without detracting from plot, characters, or the accessibility of the narrative for non-Christians.

While there was a playfulness to their fan work, fans also took their productions seriously. Prayer was central in writing Christian fan fiction. Gary described his decision to write what became a novel-length Christian *My Little Pony* allegory as ‘actually a very prayerful decision... and I actually at one point received a really clear word from God that it was important to tell this story. I don’t know who... still to this day, I don’t know who, if there was some particular person that really needed to read it, or if I just needed it for my walk with God. But it was important to make’. Mark ‘spent fully, like, at least a couple of weeks before



I even set pen to paper... Just figuring out how to approach it, praying about it, the rest of it'. He admitted to continuing praying that the story would have an impact on those who needed God. For other authors, prayer was not just a way of seeking God's blessing on their fan activities, but their stories flowed from an unexpected encounter with God when writing. These responses share elements with Craig Detweiler's research with Christian TV writers, who felt the Holy Spirit move them even when writing dialogue for avowedly secular productions such as *That 70s Show* (2013, 173).

Fans' productions therefore emerged as a form of worship. Oscar, a 21 year-old Evangelical in the Southern US, wrote a story focused on Luke 22:43 that identified the *My Little Pony* character Fluttershy as the angel who strengthens Jesus prior to his death. He recalled 'It was the week before... week before Easter and I... was feeling... I was feeling the religion... I was feeling extra strong, and wanted to put [the story] out there so that more people would see it.' Brett wrote his story in the same genre 'in celebration of Easter. Cos I figured... I figured... why not?'. Similarly, Craig remembered that he produced his Jesus in Equestria story because 'I was just really... It was written in two hours on Easter morning 2014 – two years ago – in which I was, well, just heavily inspired.' Sam initially remarked on the time of his story's composition as a humorous aside: 'And it's funny, 'cos I actually wrote this around Easter last year... so.... it's kinda... I guess it has a bit of a kind of "Holy property" to it, if you want to get all weird and stuff!' He quickly developed this by talking about his personal testimony and the way in which he felt the story emerged as the spontaneous overflow of worship: 'Because I was feeling really connected to God, you know, and just kinda in tune with him because it was Easter and I was really, you know... And the Holy Spirit was kinda working in me... and it was a miracle the way I see it.' For these authors, fandom bonded with a range of their wider lived religious experiences, including the sacrality of Easter and the close affective bond they felt to Christ due to the liturgical season. The language and

imagery of fandom operated as the natural overflow of their sense of worship and proximity to the divine.

## **Conclusion**

The research in this article is preliminary and qualitative in nature – it can make no claims to offer a statistically representative overview of Christians within fandoms. However, it does reveal important insights into the ways in which fan identity and Christian identity can combine together to produce new expressions of faith. These interviews suggest that affective experiences of fandom, including connection to particular characters, can serve as the conduit for religious experiences. However, these are not interpreted as representing an alternative to fans' existing beliefs or as a new secular rival. Instead, fans interpret these experiences through their existing faith system, bolstering their belief in the process. Rather than viewing fandom as oppositional to their religious identities, many Christian fans actually see it as a part of their faith identity and everyday religion. This research therefore challenges the idea that intense fandom is akin to idolatry, as suggested by Doss and Maltby et al. Although some interviews did suggest that fans were aware of the danger of their fandom becoming an 'idol', in line with Abraham's findings, fans were able to reconcile their faith and subcultural interests. They achieved this through sacralisation and seeing their fannish interests as an arena through which God could work.

It is important to remember that although this article focused on Christian fanworks, Christian fans are also active as general members of their fandoms. They produce stories and art works without specific Christian themes alongside the faith-based material, and contribute to the wider community. Feeling part of the community led to a desire to share faith with other fans in ways that made sense within fandom's cultural milieu. Fandom tools and techniques became a way for their faith to develop, while also reaching out to others. While it is

unsurprising that fans find their own faith in their fan object if drawing on Sandvoss's theory of the neutrosemic nature of fan texts, fans' subsequent self-conscious use of that fan object as a way of articulating their faith, its importance to them, and their performance of their identity both as Christians and as fans, deserves further research. Such fan productions operate as a shared language through which theological ideas can be communicated to those with no religious background.

Rather than seeing fandom as potentially in opposition or as a replacement to religious belief, it would be more fruitful to examine ways in which different aspects of media usage and fandom feed into the lived religious experience of individuals. Future research might therefore concentrate on the affective appeal of fandom themed church services and the way in which theology develops through engagement with the fan object. Fan works, such as fan fiction and art, have often been portrayed as a way in which subaltern groups have been able to reclaim popular texts (Jenkins 2013). Although there have been several challenges to this overly-politicised discourse of fandom, it remains the case that under-represented groups can use fan works as a way of expressing marginalised voices through their art, writing, and cosplay (Scott and Click 2017; Gittinger 2018, 2019). Religious services and fan works that draw on existing affective connections with the fan object therefore serve as a particularly powerful and emotive way to communicate religious ideas. This article has focused on fandoms that are, to a large extent, predominantly white and Anglophone. Future studies, focusing on different religious traditions, or the way in which fans of colour use fandom to express their faith against dominant cultural norms, will offer fruitful lines of enquiry. This line of thinking is evident in some churches, as in Grace Cathedral, San Francisco's 2018 'Beyoncé Mass'. Here the singer's work was used as a lens to explore black women's perspectives of the Bible, reaching out to those who traditionally felt excluded from the text and from the wider church (BBC News 2018). Similarly, Gittinger's recent work on Hijabi

cosplay demonstrates ways in which Muslim women can express their faith within fandoms, while challenging both western cultural stereotypes of Muslims and traditional expectations of them in Islamic culture (2018; 2019). Both religious groups, and those studying contemporary religion, should therefore be increasingly aware that fandom is not a subcultural competitor, but rather something that includes and contributes to the wider lived religion of their members and research participants.

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