THE SECULAR RELIGION OF FANDOM

POP CULTURE PILGRIM

JENNIFER OTTER BICKERDIKE

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INTRODUCTION: MECCA
FOR MUGGLES

About a year ago, I was at King's Cross Rail Station in London. I am usually running late, completely focused on not missing whatever train or tube I am supposed to be on, so often utterly clueless on anything going on in my surroundings. This particular day, I was uncharacteristically early. I walked around, browsing the various shops and eateries that were on offer. At one end of the train station there was a huge snaking line. Curiosity got the better of me, and I got closer to have a better look as to what the attraction was.

It was a queue for Harry Potter. Harry Potter is, of course, the protagonist of the phenomenal series of books of the same name written by J.K. Rowling. The stories follow Harry as he leaves his English home to work on his inborn abilities of wizardry at Hogwarts, an exclusive school that teaches the necessary skills to succeed in the world of magic. Starring Daniel Radcliffe, movies based on the texts have spawned a global franchise, consisting of theme parks, toys, an entire online community dedicated to writing their own adventures of fan fiction using the Potter characters and a non-profit, the Harry Potter Alliance, whose mission is to 'turn fans into heroes' (The Harry Potter Alliance, 2005).

So what was the line for? No, not to meet Mr. Radcliffe or any of the other Hogwarts attendees who starred in the immensely popular films. The line was to have your picture taken next to the 'Platform 9 3/4' sign, fashioned to look like the very same spot where Harry starts his incredible adventure in both the books and the films. Though it was the middle of the week in the early afternoon – prime working hours – the line never dropped below 100 or so fans. This is not a surprising number, according to one of the guest services assistants, Harriet, who works at the site. Since opening on December 15, 2012, the platform hosts 'at least a thousand visitors day' (Harriet, 2015), with an increase during 'school holidays' (ibid.).

Once the devout reach the front of the queue, each person can pose with a Harry-esque luggage cart which looks to be hanging precariously between this world of 'muggles' (the term for the non-magically inclined used in the

Figure 1   Fans of Harry Potter pose at Platform 9 3/4 at King's Cross Rail Station, London, England. Photo: Jennifer Otter Bickerdike (2015)

Rowling books) and the land of wizards that Harry travels to to fulfill his destiny and learn about his powers. One employee of Platform 9 3/4 takes your picture, while another stands out of frame, to toss your scarf or pull your jacket, thus giving the same illusion in the photo of movement, of being pulled from

one world to another as Harry was. Conveniently nestled right next door is the Platform 9 3/4 shop, where the avid can purchase an array of Potter items, from stuffed animals to sweaters, books to costumes.

The existence of Platform 9 3/4, and especially its tie-in retail shop, is a perfect example of modern-day, media-induced pilgrimage. The Platform exists solely both as an homage to the Potter books and as a way to draw customers to the shopping experience of the entire King's Cross complex, particularly the store dedicated to the space itself. It also clearly informs of a massive migration from fully fictional to existence and grounding in an actual place. I have been back to the area of King's Cross Station that houses Platform 9 3/4 several times since my initial encounter. On every occasion – no matter the season, the day of the week (though on weekends it is much busier, suggesting that tourists from the UK and EU as well as from far-flung locations are making their way to the attraction) – the queue remains at a solid minimum of 100 deep. The platform being the destination instead of just the mediating place of start or finish to a journey turns even the accepted and normative expectations and meaning for the location on its head, as this once transitional space becomes *the* place. By making something pretend actual, Platform 9 3/4 makes Potter actual, owning a space and place just as other working, 'real' platforms in the station. Perhaps, arguably, this 'pretend' shuttle between a real and an imaginary Potter world actually sees more people per day than some of the other active platforms within the station.

Platform 9 3/4 is just one of a myriad of possible examples illustrating how media pilgrimage has become a booming business in the 21st century. Fans of television, books, rock groups, and films flock to places associated with their favorite show, writer, artist, or movie, trying to embody and perhaps understand what inspired the beloved piece of work and, more importantly, to cobble together their own personal identity, seeking meaning in an ever more divergent and fast-paced world. At the same time, while technology allows for quicker connection on a global level than ever before, participation in organized group activities is dropping at an alarming rate. Robert D. Putnam (2001) refers to this as the 'Bowling Alone' phenomenon. His theory utilizes the recreational activity of bowling in the US as an example of decreasing social engagement in large, organized groups. There are less people bowling in leagues or formalized clubs; yet the raw number of people still participating in the sport has not declined. This acts as an illustration of the withdrawal from community, from group to individual; Putnam argues that this can be applied to explain the falling numbers in other real-time social activities, such as non-profit work, voter turnout, and committees.

CHURCH OF THE POISON MIND

One of the largest downturns in the US and the UK in such structured com-munal activities can be seen in the steep decline of attendance at many traditional Christian venues in the past decades.[1] In his 2014 article, 'Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore', Steve McSwain cites some stag-gering statistics highlighting the hemorrhaging of church goers in the US. He first addresses the Hartford Institute of Religion Research (no date) which recorded that 'more than 40% of Americans "say" they go to church weekly'. However, McSwain found that this rather robust figure is incorrect, as the same survey noted that 'less than 20% [of people who claimed to attend church weekly] are actually in church'. McSwain states, 'in other words, more than 80% of Americans are finding more fulfilling things to do on weekends'. The actual closure of physical spaces to follow traditional religious doctrine is shrinking as well in America. McSwain notes, 'somewhere between 4,000 and 7,000 churches close their doors every year', going on to quote Southern Baptist researcher Thom Rainer (2013) who 'puts the estimate higher … between 8,000 and 10,000 churches will likely close this year [in 2014]'. The trend it seems will continue, as few churches are seeing new affiliates as older ones die. McSwain underscores this, noting that 'between the years 2010 and 2012, more than half of all churches in America added not one new member. Each year, nearly 3 million more previous churchgoers enter the ranks of the "religiously unaffiliated"' (2014).

The UK has experienced a similar dramatic demise of participants, mirroring a move from traditional spaces and beliefs of religion toward a non-denominational, more personalized, secular identity. According to a new survey in 2014, 'In five decades, the number of people with no religion in Britain has grown from just 3 per cent of the population to nearly half … among adults aged under 25, nearly two-thirds define themselves as "nones", or people with no reli-gious affiliation' (Gledhill, 2014). Gledhill argues that the fate of what has been considered traditional religion is in danger of becoming a thing of the past. Several strands of the Christian church, in particular, are in jeopardy of being fully eradicated within our lifetime if current behaviors move forward into the near future. Gledhill (2014) points out that, 'If the trends continue, Methodists

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[1] While there has been growing numbers joining other religions such as Islam and sects such as evangelical Christianity, for the sake of this book, traditional, western, established practices of Christianity are the focus of the argument. A much different and just as relevant picture would surely emerge if the lens was placed on one of the other groups.

will be extinct in a few decades and the Church of England also faces massive decline by the end of the century'.

However, new groups inspired and based upon media and colonized via the internet are on the rise.[2] These virtual sites are often dedicated to pop culture and celebrities, as well as an ever more niche-focused array of real-time tours allowing fans to experience the spaces, places, and scenery featured in their favorite entertainment medium. This makes for a strong argument that media are replacing religion as the 'opiate for the masses' (Marx, 1843). Following the Marxist argument that 'Man makes religion, religion does not make man' (ibid.), man, therefore, creates technology and the beliefs and values it allows to be upheld and provoked. The revolution on every level of social interaction of the internet underscores the possibility of this hypothesis. In 2013, 83% of the British population had access to the World Wide Web, with 73% using the internet on a daily basis (Office for National Statistics, 2013). This is 20 million more users from the 2006 poll, the year when such statistics began being documented. In the US, almost 86% of the population are internet users, up by 7% in 2014 from 2013 (Internet Live Stats, 2014). On a global level, over '40% of the population has an internet connection today [March 15, 2015]. In 1995, it was less than 1%' (Internet Live Stats, 2015). Another survey looked across different online platforms to find a startling 11 hours spent by the average American adult per day on digital media (Petronzio, 2014). Britons are not far behind, allotting more time to the virtual universe than to one of the basic human necessities. Ofcom (Miller, 2014) found that 'UK adults spend an average of eight hours and 41 minutes a day on media devices, compared with the average night's sleep of eight hours and 21 minutes'. Looking specifically at social networking sites, Ofcom (2014) reported that 'Two-thirds (66%) of online adults say they have a current social networking site profile … nearly all with a current profile (96%) have one on Facebook, three in ten social networkers say they have a Twitter profile, and one in five say they have a YouTube (22%) or WhatsApp profile (20%)'. Social networking overall remains a popular pastime, with 60% of users visiting sites more than once a day, an increase from 50% in 2012, and with 83% of those in the age group of 16–24 years doing so (69% in 2012) (Miller, 2014).

Ballve (2013) notes how Facebook still leads the pack of social media platforms, with over 1.15 billion monthly active users worldwide. The UK comes fifth in the world with over 30.3 million users of the site, with the US on top with over 151.8 million.

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[2]   Again, this is based on the accepted ideas of institutional Christianity.

All of these statistics illustrate how, metrically speaking, time spent on technology, digital media, and socializing in a virtual manner has not only replaced but arguably usurped old practices and beliefs, showing how popular culture could be moving from the profane to the sacred. Based upon sheer time and dedicated attention span, media have become the worshipped, proving a massive rupture in values and faith in the last half century from any time previous with the advent of an ever more variety of available frameworks to satisfy the seeming humanistic need to look for meaning outside of the individual. We have now emerged into an 'age of simulation … [that] begins with a liquidation of all referential – worse: by their artificial resurrection in systems of signs' (Baudrillard, 1995: 4) – the sign, the image, the idea becoming fully authenticated without necessarily any substance to support it. This is perhaps not a new phenomenon; it is just the quicker evolution of popular belief systems aided by the instantaneous nature of the internet. As Baudrillard argues, 'All of Western faith and good faith was engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could exchange for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange' (1995: 10). He could be referring to an image of the Virgin Mary or the Facebook thumbs-up for 'liking' a post – they become interchangeable in the current literal 'marketplace' of faith where video game consoles, mobile phones, and Jesus are all competing for the time of a follower. As we look around for meaning, there is no 'real' truth, there is just the popular value system of any given time. What keeps a sense of religiosity afloat in any epoch is possibly the 'proliferation of myths of origins and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity' (12). Within this context, religion and fandom can be synonymous, simply defined as a moveable feast of beliefs followed or adhered to by a defined group of people. However, some academics like Duffet do not agree to this theory. Duffet argues against the comparison of religion and fandom, which only succeeds in underscoring how similar they are. He contends, 'The "religiosity" idea maintains its grip by producing "evidence" that is an artifact of its own perception. Its central premise – that fandom is a religion because it looks like one – is weak because it is impossible to test conclusively in the field' (2003: 511). However, unlike a scientific test where there is usually a quantifiable answer, fandom and religion are both driven by faith, personal taste, and applicable societal norms differing for each individual. Duffet goes on to contradict himself, saying

> The question of whether the comparison [between religion and fandom] is valid appears to rest upon the precise desire of similarity: to say that fandom is a

religion is to assert that a line has been crossed. Yet fandom and religion are both abstract categories of collective experience. That line can never be clear and the question is impossible to answer conclusively with reference to field. (2003: 515)

Here he ascertains that as neither can be clearly defined, neither can, therefore, be discounted as not containing a subset of the other. Though he is arguing that fandom and religion are not the same, he simultaneously does not create a set of perimeters to either define each one or one from the other, therefore eliminating the possibility that fandom can act as religion. If viewed as substantive, religion clearly fits into the boundaries of fandom. Maybe one supports and defines the other, providing complimentary elements which alone one cannot grant. Thus fandom and religion may be neither the same nor different, but perhaps intertwined.

What about when religion fails? Even the most devout member of a faith must have moments of shaken validity of a benevolent God when confronted with the many atrocities of modern living. Where is this all mighty being when horrible things happen? The idea of religion catching and perhaps even protecting the individual from a fall seems inherently flawed when contrasted with the omnipresence of hardships. The object, however, is always available, with a similar array of believers to create community. For example, the music from a favorite artist or a movie featuring a comforting theme can appear to 'be there' when things go wrong, perhaps offering the solace not attained from traditional means of accepted worship. The internet, social networking, and other technological advances have dramatically increased the ease to connect with people who share such experiences, who may be obtaining such guidance and hope via a mediatized commodity not previously held in such high esteem.

The existence of Cullenists, a religion based upon the characters populating Stephenie Meyer vampire trilogy *Twilight*, underscores this seismic shift. Cullenists claim that they are '[j]ust like any other religion', that there is 'some spirituality to be had in the *Twilight* series, forming rules and principles upon which to base their tenets' (Bell, 2009). One of the base ideas of the faith claims that 'Edward and the rest of the *Twilight* characters are real', that '[t]he *Twilight* series should be worshipped' (ibid.). Cullenists are also expected to read from at least one of the vampire books a day in a Bible studyesque manner and make a pilgrimage to Forks, the town where the books/movies are set. The self-proclaimed 'rainiest town in the contiguous US' (Discover Forks Washington, 2015) makes the most of its inclusion in the best-selling novels. The Forks website invites visitors to 'explore the rain forest and beaches

and just maybe, catch a glimpse of a vampire or werewolf!' in the same way that 'Bella [the female protagonist of *Twilight*] did' (ibid.). Forks has an annual event dually dedicated to *Twilight* writer Stephenie Meyer and to celebrate the birthday of fictional *Twilight* protagonist Bella. The Stephenie Meyer Day/ Bella's Birthday Weekend features a map of *Twilight*-specific spots to visit and the opportunity to sit in 'Bella's trucks' – automobiles resembling the ones used in the movies.

This book examines the function of such fandom, specifically the visiting of spaces like these which have been recently, through the media, deemed worthy of sanctification and a newly elevated status of importance. The book will look at how such pilgrimages are used as a means for forming and main-taining a common language of culture, creating a replacement apparatus based on more traditional frameworks of religious worship and salvation, while becoming an ever more dominant mechanism for constructing individuality and finding belonging in a commodified culture. What are the ramifications of placing such importance and mantle upon such media-driven vehicles – are they further separating us from authenticity and the very substance we long for? Or do they act as a means to form and connect to new communities in innovative ways?

Delving into these issues allows for a close scrutiny of spaces, fan communi-ties, and rituals associated with each place, providing a unique and provocative investigation into how technology, media, and a humanistic need for guidance are forming novel ways of expressing value, forging self, and finding significance in an uncertain world.

IS FANDOM RELIGION?

In his book *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption*, Cornell Sandvoss (2005: 3) argues, it 'has become next to impossible to find realms of public life which are unaffected by fandom'. A quick glance around any grocery store, bus shel-ter, or Google search underscores his point, as the constant bombardment by pop culture to gain our attention and capture our money is omnipresent. Yet this alone does not religion make; it is the actions, beliefs, and meaning applied to the spaces and places associated with key entertainment entities which transforms the everyday to the hallowed, as the lens of devotion, previ-ously often reserved for well-established saints and holy divinities, focuses on new destinations and icons.

Sandvoss and other academics acknowledge that there are various simi-larities between fandom and religion. Hills views that 'the correspondences

between narratives of religious conversion and becoming a fan' as 'pat general-izations' (2002: 118). He perceives religion as providing the template or model for fan practice, as 'they are both centered around acts of devotion, which may create similarities of experience' (ibid.). Thus the language and behaviors of what he calls the 'discourse of religious conversion' bestows 'fans with a model for describing the experience of becoming a fan' (ibid.). Fandom, in this sce-nario, does not, therefore, replace religion; it just uses the cues and expected actions of religion as the framework for fan practices.

Sandvoss agrees that there is a big difference between religion and fandom as 'fans aim to take the place of the star in a way that is unlike religious devotion (in which devotees do not seek to supplant God)' (2005: 62). Hill and Jenkins (1992; cf. Hills and Jenkins 2002) also concede to 'the religious symbols and language in fandom containing analogies to religious doctrine', yet they view this as similar to 'other structures or institutions shaping and affirming identity, such as nation-states or ethnicity'. Sandvoss furthers this idea of identity, argu-ing that fandom is a form of self-reflection, as 'What qualifies fans' emphasis on the resemblance between themselves and their object of fandom … [is] not objectively verifiable, but based on the particular meaning which fans construct in their reading of the fan object' (2005: 103). He goes on to say that 'the object of fandom … is the coincidental medium of self-reflection, whose true quality lies in its reflective capacity', as 'the key indication of fans' self-reflective reading of their object of fandom then lies in the way in which they superim-pose attributes of the self, their beliefs and values systems and, ultimately, their sense of self on the object of fandom' (104). This once again brings back the interest not to the object of interest itself but to how that object relates and helps define the self.

There are two fundamental problems with these theories. First, Hill and Sandvoss both neglect to acknowledge that many religions and religious structures themselves are filled with the very 'pat generalizations' and 'self reflections' that they rail against. This is illustrated in the western world by the commonality of the 'salad bar' approach to religion – the taking on of those doctrines which an individual likes and/or feels applies to them and ignor-ing and/or not acknowledging the others. Even the religious portion of life has become viewed as a marketplace, where '"choice" has reigned supreme' (MacPhail, no date). A sermon from Reverend Bryn MacPhail illustrates this approach, 'We live in an society where choice has become one of our most esteemed freedoms' (ibid.). However, MacPhail bemoans the current state of many believers, arguing that individual choice does not have a place when interpreting the Bible and practicing faith. He states,

> What I fear, however, is that many people import a salad bar mentality into their approach to the Christian life … [in a recent article [a] young churchgoer [was quoted] as saying, 'Instead of me fitting religion, I found a religion to fit me'. The writer of the article observed of this mentality, 'They don't convert – they choose' and 'by this standard, the most successful churches are those that most closely resemble a suburban shopping mall'. In the market place, choice is a good thing … At the salad bar we choose according to taste. We choose according to personal preference. At the salad bar, we load up on what we like, and we leave behind what we don't like. We cannot do the same as we approach the Bible. As we approach the Bible, we do not choose to believe the things we find palatable and leave the rest behind. (Ibid.)

MacPhail's points illustrate how the prevalent and long-established mechanisms of church-driven faith may be irrelevant in a customer world dominated by media and capitalism. One has to ask, if the rules laid out by the Bible, Koran, or any other spiritual text were all followed in exactly the same way, e.g. NOT in the very 'self-reflective' individualistic manner which Sandvoss attributes to fandom – would the different communities of the world be so at odds with one another? Arguably, religion itself is designed to be self-reflective. However, the manner by which it is often preached and practiced, as MacPhail's sermon astutes, is anything but not keeping pace with the current increasing importance placed on the individual. The metrics do not support conventional spirituality as a sustainable framework; on the contrary, church participation numbers dropping so dramatically has dovetailed with the massive uptick in social media, allowing formerly disconnected people around the globe to create increasingly niche-driven communities online. The internet in this manner becomes the conduit and incubator for endless varieties of fandom, with access to participate via the computer, tablet, or other handheld device as pervasive as prayer. Where the must-never-leave-home-without-it item was once a Crucifix or a set of rosary beads, the holy device du jour is now arguably the tablet, the mobile phone, or whatever portable technology is fresh from Silicon Valley. However, Sandvoss asserts that fandom

> separates objective resemblance and self-reflection … [by] … the subjective reading position through which the fan finds his or her values and beliefs in the fan text. This self-reflective interpretation of the object of fandom discloses itself in the sheer range of varying, and frequently contradictory, readings of the same object of fandom by different fans and fan groups. (2005: 104–50)

His very ideas attempting to differentiate religion from fandom read as if he could be describing either one, as the lines in-between have become so blurred
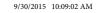
as to be indiscernible. Reverend MacPhail laments such picking and choosing of doctrines and scripture; however, the many perspectives and meanings of one of the original sources of textual worship, the Bible itself, provide support of the variable nuisances as prescribed by different groups of people. Maybe the followers of Jesus are an example of early fandom. Dyer's assertions of celebrity provide a lens through which to examine the validity of such a claim. He suggests,

> Like the sign, the celebrity represents something other than itself. The material reality of the celebrity sign – that is, the actual person who is at the core of the representation – disappears into a cultural formation of meaning. Celebrity signs represent personality – more specifically, personalities that are given heightened cultural significance with the social world. (2004: 56–66)

This together with the Sandvoss argument allows for the situating of the examination of fandom as religion. Yet as the Platform 9 3/4 example shows, what was once imaginary has now been subjugated by fandom to become real. As Baudrillard contends, 'the age of simulation thus begins with a liquidation of all referential – worse: by their artificial resurrection in systems of signs … substituting signs of the real for the real itself' (1995: 3–4). The virtual world allows for such interchangeability, for lines between frameworks to become obscured and even, in some cases, completely obsolete, as technology allows for more varied, more complex, and often more international structures to be built and nurtured in new and unprecedented manners, making formally assumed identities, i.e. nationalism or ethnicity, the supplementary form of individual identity. In these instances, belief and participation in fandom supersedes many other forms of previous worship, as 'It is now impossible to isolate the process of the real, or to prove the real' (Baudrillard, 1995: 41). For some, going to Platform 9 3/4 becomes as important than visiting Mecca; or perhaps Platform 9 3/4 *is* Mecca in this new economy where 'it is reality itself today that is hyperrealist' (147). The virtual and the real are often one and the same. It is the speed and capability of such technology that is the premium in how we connect – not necessarily real-time worship.

This shift can also be attributed to the role advertising and capitalism plays in the modern consumer's life. A 2007 study examining television habits of children under 18 found that the average child would view more than 20,000 individual advertisements in a year (Internet Resources to Accompany the Sourcebook for Teaching Science, no date), a figure that surely has ballooned since the increase in commercials becoming omnipresent on the internet. In his 2001 documentary *Merchants of Cool*, correspondent Douglas Rushkoff paints a much bleaker picture

as to the sheer amount of advertising one has already encountered by age 18. He accepts that on any average day, a teenager in the US will view over three thousand discreet advertisements, and that by the time a young person is 18, they will have seen over 10 million discreet ads. There is endless opportunity for companies to try to 'convert' the young, as 75% of all teens have a TV in their own room, and one in three have their own personal computer on which they spend two hours on average a night (Rushkoff, 2001).

Many churches are even being encouraged to directly 'market' to possible attendees. This age group of digital natives – people who have grown up with the internet and web being a part of their daily lives – are 'adults aged under 25', a demographic where 'nearly two-thirds define themselves as "nones", or people with no religious affiliation' (Gledhill, 2014). Even religion itself is using the rhetoric of sales and marketing; as Gledhill admits, the findings present an enormous challenge for the churches over how they make faith appealing to young people, in a world where many young will be appalled at how the male-dominated church leadership has made discrimination against women and homosexuals a defining feature of orthodox mission.

Another issue is the 'failure to replace older generations of churchgoers' as the 'children of churchgoers are not attending as adults' (Gledhill, http://www. christiantoday.com, 2014). How to connect with young people? McSwain (2014) derides the current state of many churches as still operating in the age of the Industrial Revolution. Instead of embracing new means of communication and adapting their worship experiences to include technology, scores of traditional churches – mainly Protestant and almost all Catholic churches[3] – do not utilize the very instruments that most Millennials depend on to interpret their world. McSwain (2014) suggests,

> Pastors and priests … use social media and, even in worship … right smack in the middle of a sermon, ask the youth and young adults to text their questions about the sermon's topic … that you'll retrieve them on your smartphone … and, before dismissing, answer the three best questions about today's sermon.

His idea of trying to engage young people where they live – on the internet, via media devices – has often not been met with approval from many of his peers. McSwain reports, 'most of the ministers look at me as if I've lost my

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[3] Though recently an iPad app called 'Confession: A Roman Catholic App' has been released, allowing even the most sinful to confess on-the-go.

mind' (ibid.), when he introduces such ideas. Rojek notes how important it is to recognize the changing modes of not only worship but how to communicate the message of the church itself:

> Religious belief is being reconfigured to provide meaning and solidarity as responses to the uprooting effect of globalization. Because these responses are communicated through the mass-media, they borrow the style and form of celebrity culture. (2001: 41)

With such resistance to speak to young people in a way which matches up with the current expected mechanisms for dialogue in the 2.0 world, it is not surprising to see such a drop in participation of customary worship. McSwain (2014) points out that instead of worrying about possible unorthodox manners of preaching the gospel, today's religious leaders should be more concerned about 'why the Millennials have little or no interest in what they [religious leaders] have to say'.

This further shows how the instant accessibility on a global level has made the populace equally more connected and further isolated, as we move from formerly group activities to lone participation – attending a church service and sharing a communal experience with others shifts to a text message solely for the individual on the personal handheld device. Instead of watching a movie with several hundred others at a large cinema, the film moves to the family home to be viewed by only those in the room, to the individual looking at a smartphone or a tablet in a lone hand, headphones plugged in, a score heard only by the sole listener. In one way, it is a shift to belief in a virtual place without a space; on the other hand, it releases one from former accepted manners for anchoring significance through a shared experience and authenticity as prescribed by assumed meanings.

Hill, Sandvoss, and other academics of their ilk preach that fandom and religion are black and white, that they are not the same, and though some of the behaviors associated with fandom may resemble acts traditionally attributed to formulated theological practice, the two are different. However, those at the sharp end in the field, such as McSwain, MacPhail, and Gledhill, illustrate the actual reality of the state of religion in the western world currently. For many, it is a pick-and-mix to reflect one's own personal belief system, not an indoctrinated and blindly accepted code of beliefs as often preached. This makes for very grey religion; what is religion, and what is worship in this technology-ruled, consumer-driven marketplace where even faith is grappling for the attention of possible buyers, er, converts? Sandvoss's claim that the fan wants to embody

and become the idol again seems to be describing not necessarily contemporary and normalized fandom but the very sacraments of the Christian church, where the confirmed drink wine to represent and embody the blood of Christ, the bread wafer consumed in place of the body of the divine son of God. Rojek goes further with this connection, stating,

> Other than religion, celebrity culture is the only cluster of human relationships in which mutual passion typically operates without physical interaction. The general form of interaction between fan and the celebrity takes the form of consumer absorbing a mediated image … Religion … refers to the formulation of belief in a general order of existence, in which powerful, durable attachments are invested in spiritually relevant objects or persons. (2001: 48–9)

Arguably these holy acts of worship inside the church are the clearest examples of wanting to become the very entity of worship, the 'durable attachments', as taking the communion puts Christ directly into the body of the believer, thus taking a piece of their idol and having it become part of the devout. Sandvoss's focus on the fans – not on the accepted practices of many Christian churches – of imbibing their God once again only underscores the ever more interchangeable nature between the frameworks and practices of religion and fandom. It could be argued using Sandvoss's very theory that the church attendees are simply huge fans of Jesus – which removed from the accepted narrative of religion and the historical context of baggage associated with it, surely they could be. Rojek sees, 'in the absence of a unifying deity, some people search for cult figures to give life new meaning' (2001: 95). He views 'celebrity culture [not as] a substitute for religion' (97). Instead, he sees religion as providing the frameworks for how we relate to celebrity and act as fans. His ideas lend themselves to support the idea that what has traditionally been viewed as the all-seeing hand of the church is really outdated, arguing

> Today perhaps only family rivals celebrity culture in providing the scripts, prompts and supporting equipment of 'impression management' for the presentation of self in public life. Indeed, a good deal of evidence, notably the high rate of divorce and the rising number of single-person households, suggests that the family is in decline, while celebrity culture seems to be triumphant ascendant. (Ibid.)

Celebrity, and the media used to create, sustain, and continue interest in fan communities, has more importance in the daily lives of the average westerner than ever before. As we leave the conventional idioms of holiness behind

in our dot-com world, there is still a need to look to something, someone for guidance. Many people are at least vaguely familiar with the basic frameworks of religion. This makes a perfect atmosphere for celebrity and fandom to act as a modern arena of reverence, based on images and ideas already known and accepted by many, allowing for an individualized belief system populated by bespoke icons taken from a variety of reference points. According to Rojek, 'fans today … seek out celebrities to anchor or support [the fans'] personal life' (2001: 74). Celebrity culture is custom-fit for this use, having an endless array of individuals, places, and interests propelled via the media as having assumed importance. As Rojek points out, 'Celebrity culture is secular. Because the roots of secular society lie in Christianity, many of the symbols of success and failure in celebrity draw on myths and rites of religious ascent and descent' (74). Fandom thus enters a new epoch, one where it is not only the language, actions, and modes but the normalized participation of such ritual which can come to replace past religious roles. Instead of the martyred glorified soul, it is the 'celebrities [who] provide us with heroic role models in an age of mass standardization and predictability' (93).

I'LL BE YOUR SAINT

In his 2002 book, Hills makes the distinction between a celebrity and an icon. A celebrity, he suggests, in the tradition of Daniel Boorstin (1962), is 'often considered to be a synthetic creation, made for the purposes of audience appeal and subject to the transient and fleeting touch of "fame"'. The icon, on the other hand, 'moves continuously across social historical frames, being re-mapped and reworked in this process: it's iteration, or an accreting set of iterations' (Hills, 2002: 140). However, Hills argues, neither 'stars [nor] celebrities … are … mythical heroes' (142–3). This is problematic, as often repeated tales of triumph over adversity to reach astronomical heights (see Elvis Presley, Eminem, Oprah Winfrey) have become the backbone to the western world's narrative of self-made wo/man. Marshall underscores this point, as 'The star is meant to epitomize the potential of everyone in American society' (1997: 9) – the myth of the availability of high financial achievement being a unilaterally reachable goal to aim for. Dyer echoes this sentiment, as 'the star is universally individualized, for the star is the representation of the potential of the individual' (2004: 16). He also again asserts a parallel between celebrities and gods, as an apparatus to order and make sense of life. He states,

Stars represent typical ways of behaving, feeling and thinking in contemporary society, ways that have been socially, culturally, historically constructed … Stars are also embodiments of the social categories in which people are placed and through which they have to make sense of their lives, and indeed through which we make our lives categories of class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and so on. (Ibid.)

Just as the lessons learned from saints or other religious figures have provided a sense of order, now the stories of the stars, especially those who died young and tragically,[4] provide the template for how we should be living our lives. They become immortal, as in our secular society the honorific status conferred on certain celebrities outlasts physical death (Rojek, 2001: 78). Their lives – or, more accurately, the way their lives are portrayed through the media – position them as 'the heroes of popular culture [that] simultaneously offer hope for everyone's success and the promise of the entire social system to be open to these moments of luck' (Dyer, 2004: 9). Rojek supports this idea of the 'new' legends of the celebrity as the modern-day folk stories, pointing out that 'The wealth, freedom and popularity of stars fulfilled the American dream. Hollywood celebrities were self-made individuals who achieved their wealth and power by their talents and industry'. He more fully fleshes out the mystical aura surrounding the famous, stating 'celebrities often seem magical or superhuman' (2001: 13). He also makes the connection between traditional idols found in conventional forms of worship and celebrity culture, arguing that 'celebrities replaced the monarchy as the new symbols of recognition and belonging, and as the belief in God waned, celebrities became immortal' (14).

MEDIA PILGRIMAGE AND THE DARK TOURIST

I'm going to Graceland

Graceland

In Memphis Tennessee

I'm going to Graceland

Poorboys and Pilgrims with families

And we are going to Graceland

My traveling companion is nine years old

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4   Therefore they cannot be making outlandish and loutish commentary on social media, putting out an unpopular piece of work or committing the biggest sin of aging.

He is the child of my first marriage

But I've reason to believe

We both will be received

In Graceland …

[…]

But I've reason to believe

We all will be received

In Graceland

('Graceland', Paul Simon, *Graceland*, Warner Brothers, 1986)

From his 1986 Grammy award-winning album, Simon places the former home and final resting place of Elvis Presley as worthy of reverence and a place of comfort, likening the Memphis Tennessee destination to a holy ground. The wording he chooses echoes the phraseology which one would expect to accompany the description of a church or other sacred institution where the downtrodden – those looking for sanctuary and divinity – can find relief and look to bring reinvigoration to spiritual beliefs. The 'poorboys and pilgrims with families' as well as Simon's own 'child of [his] first marriage' make for a divergent description of the vulnerable, destitute, and those living with the broken bonds of holy matrimony (as divorce is often viewed by the Catholic church as a major sin against God), all going to see the space made famous by the King. Yet Simon's carefully picked words – 'we both will be received', in fact, 'we *all* (my emphasis) will be received/In Graceland' – speak to both the inclusive nature of such spaces as well as the power of the mediated myth of Elvis – the country boy born in a two-room home in Tupelo, Mississippi, going on to be one of the most significant cultural figures in the 20th century and beyond.

These feelings are not unique to the travelers in Simon's song, as, according to Rojek, 'the pilgrims who flock to Graceland, the burial place and former home of Elvis Presley, do not so much honor a dead God as proclaim the presence of a living secular one in popular culture' (2001: 63). Going to a place linked to such a figure allows the fan/pilgrim to feel closer through proximity. This is often crucial for maintaining and rooting continued investment in the idol, as 'relationships between fans and celebrities frequently involve unusually high levels of non-reciprocal emotional dependence, in which fans project intensely positive feeling onto the celebrity' (51).

Elvis makes for an interesting case study for the specific cross-roads of death and media creating the perfect storm of rebirth – the emergence of a perfect icon, rising from the death of a conflicted, complicated human. The dead cannot speak for themselves, allowing any assortment of ideas, values, and mythology to be projected onto them. Any physical objects left behind – images, music, movies, even personal belongings – shift from a mere material good to a sacred item, entrenched with deeper and more important relevance than existed before death. The importance to fans of visiting the space once occupied by Elvis provides another parallel between fandom and religion, as 'the preserva-tion of relics from the bodies and possessions of the saints is a common feature of religious practice' (Rojek, 2001: 59). Even the most mundane of object – a scrap of hair, a discarded school card – is transformed from the everyday to the sacred. Death allows for the retelling of the icon's story and the ability for him/her to be reframed as an aspirational, flawless good ad infinitum, as 'death provides no obstacle to the commodification of the celebrity' (60).

Hills uses Presley to summarize this post-mortem phenomenon, stating, 'death cleansed Elvis – even the scandalous type of death which claimed him – replacing the grotesque narrative of an excessive and, in many ways, foolish life, with an absolutely irrational and enigmatic end-point' (2002: 141). He goes on to point out that through distribution and replication, Elvis changes, evolves, blurs from a troubled human to that of an easy-to-understand and quick process: 'Elvis becomes a cult icon by virtue of his image's persistence and his repro-duction or reiteration across generations and across social-historical contexts' (141–2). Yet it is not the 'real' Elvis that is being adored – but this new version, the good-looking, safe model – with all the rough corners, deep-fried-sandwich loving, drug snarkeling, womanizing ways cut off and left out.

Graceland provides a physical grounding place for the Presley legend. This makes his 'story' appear to be based in a reality instead of simply an ethereal narrative. Visitors will all be received at the mansion, as long as they can cough up the variable ticket price of $36–77 (£24–52) for entry. Hills contends,

> While Graceland certainly didn't make Elvis into a star … the house has had a significant and largely unacknowledged – impact on the shape of Elvis's star-dom ever since he purchased it in March 1957. Graceland gave Elvis something no other US celebrity of the twentieth century had: a permanent place to call 'home' that was as well known as its celebrity resident. (2002: 154)

Rodman echoes the importance of real-time space in the King's lasting appeal, 'Perhaps the single most important effect that Graceland had on Elvis's public

image is that it gave his stardom a stable, highly visible, physical anchor in the real world' (1996: 99). More importantly, it provided Elvis's fans – and the mythos of Elvis – a place to go to, the opportunity to literally retread the footsteps of their fallen idol. Instead of Elvis mania being an untouchable firmament, the stories now had tangible materiality.

Such a mix of death and travel can be defined as a form of dark tourism, a purposeful visit for leisure to places where a macabre, grisly event, or tragedy occurred – usually something so horrific, it pushes the mind to reenvision how it could have actually happened. Rojek suggests that such spaces are 'black spots', specific locations – like the Memphis mansion – marked by the death of a famous person (1993: 137–45). Going to such places is a growing industry, as 'tourist interest in recent death, disaster and atrocity is a growing phenomenon in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries' (Foley & Lennon, 2010: 3). Though the media have glorified the burgeoning business of such trips – after all, 'death has become a commodity for consumption in a global communications market' (5) – it is most likely not a new occurrence. Foley and Lennon concede,

> Several commentators view pilgrimages as one of the earliest forms of tourism; this pilgrimage is often (but not only) associated with the death of individuals or groups, mainly in circumstances which are associated with the violent or untimely. Equally, these deaths tend to have a religious or ideological significance, which transcends the event itself to provide meaning to a group of people. (3)

The story of the death, and the places associated with the figure, often becomes more important than any legacy they may have created during their lives, as '[the death itself] spawn[s] fascination and public ownership of death which has almost eclipsed their [the icons] lives. This kind of fascination appears to be an aspect of commodification of these individuals as icons via the media' (Foley & Lennon, 2010: 168). As they become a product with an attached consumer as well as cultural value, these very places, spaces, and ideas which made them famous in the first place are often leeched of their power through a seeming collective forgetfulness of the more troubling aspects of life, as 'there is an inherent danger in constant re-creation of the past, particularly if there is any attempt at stylization which can marginalize and indeed trivialize the enormity of the issues being dealt with' (29). Graceland is a shining example of this. The kitchen of the mansion where Elvis's artery-clogging, deep-fried pickles were prepared now transforms into a place where his holiness took

his daily (deep-fried) bread. The upstairs of Graceland – where Presley's bed and bathroom are located – are off limits to any public viewing, thus literally editing and curating not only the shrine of Graceland itself but the story of who and what Elvis was from the accessible glimpse. Dying in the toilet from an overdose of prescription drugs does not a romantic (and profitable) myth make – thus the last rooms actually inhabited by a living Presley are completely erased from the story itself as well as made invisible to the pilgrims' eye. Even the means by which the rags-to-riches tale is told to guests of the mansion – via personal handheld sets, 'audio guided tour[s]' (Graceland, 2014), in 9 different languages[5] – is narrated by a D-list actor, Elvis wanna be John Stamos, best known for his character of rebel-musician (sound familiar?) Uncle Jesse on US cheese-fest sitcom *Full House.*

Graceland is the epitome of a re-envisioned past come to life, offering a template for other makeovers of rock-and-roll legend, as 'the interpretation and re-telling of events surrounding the death have shaped perceptions of reality, in projecting visitors into the past; reality has been replaced with omnipresent simulations and commodifications' (Foley & Lennon, 2010: 79). No matter how grisly such spaces may be when pulled apart and closely examined, they provide the cross-cultural, omni-societal means for communication; they 'have become international markers of collective memory' (ibid.).

Hills solidifies the link between religion and secular pilgrimage with the example of Graceland. He suggests, like Rodman, that the mansion provides a concrete place for Elvis's fans in a similar way that churches act to congregate believers.

> Through Graceland, the significance of Elvis – something which would otherwise tend to be free-floating, and incidental to processes of signification – can be contained or 'anchored' in a visible, physical and public fashion … it provides a form of permanence to what would otherwise be a potentially fleeting pre-verbal experience. Hence the repeated importance of physical spaces and architecture within all forms of organized religion. Sacred spaces do not simply reproduce sacred/profane oppositions, neither are they merely 'containers' for the purity of the sacred, as these forms of behavioral legislation emerge after the fact. The 'church' is first and foremost a physical anchor for the 'oceanic feelings' of the devout; it serves to 'hold' the original emotional experience which prompts a sense of sacredness. (2002: 154)

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[5] English, German, Italian, Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish, Japanese, Mandarin Chinese, and French.

In this manner, Graceland is the church, the graves of the Presley family making it a sacred, consecrated space. The house itself comes to be the physical container for the attachments and beliefs bestowed to the King. Having such a permanent spatial marker allows for the values attributed to Presley to be both free-flowing through an individual's own personal belief system as well as simultaneously having a literal home encasing all of the 'relics' and legends of the rock star. The ability to be able to walk the same stairs that HE walked and to view the same pictures hanging on the walls of the mansion that Elvis himself once took in creates an ethereal bond between devotee and icon, crossing time, place, gender, and social economic standing. As Sandvoss writes of the mansion, 'the emotional significance of visiting fan places lies in the ability of fans to put themselves physically in the otherwise textual universe' (2005: 61). The help of the internet and the World Wide Web aides this even further – the Graceland Live Cam allows visitors from anywhere to see what is happening at any given time at the King's home (from two different perspectives, the side of the house and a full frontal shot). Updated every 60 seconds, the Live Cam further bestows a sense of importance on the myth of Presley and the place the Graceland mansion plays in his omnipresence in current modernity. The minute-to-minute updates create a sense of immediacy, as if something of incredible gravity is about to happen,[6] the cameras allowing no one, no matter where placed on the globe, to be left behind from its impact.

Within this context, travel becomes dual – a limitless, untethered internet community, which is often fueled and perpetuated by the action of visits to real-time space. This makes the various forms of media tourism – from the bus loads of *Sound of Music* fans in Salzburg, gaping at the hills where Julie Andrews twirled about the sloping greenery in the iconic 1965 film, to those visiting sites associated with much more macabre pasts in various forms of dark tourism, namely the graves of dead rock stars – sacred pilgrimages to holy grounds which fuel entire belief systems, social groups, and salvation.

MEDIA, MESSIAHS, AND MATERIALITY

Using these frameworks, each chapter will look at a different aspect of media which has spurred an ever-growing industry of pilgrimage to a variety of places. This allows for a closer examination of how each space, place, and form of engagement leads every place to have special, sometimes even sacred meaning

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6   I have logged on to the site dozens of times and have never seen anything happening – not even people walking around. It is just a stagnant picture of a house, caught by rather dodgy security cameras.

to those visiting it (while still remaining lacking of any note for those not in the 'know'). Looking at the transition from mundane to iconic bestowed-upon specific locations as well as to defined individuals will allow for a more robust understanding of the intersection between media, the making of modern messiahs (fictional, mythical, and a combination of both), as well as how materiality of place creates new meaning for a divergent assortment of formerly indistinguishable sites.

The first chapter will examine how popular television series have transformed specific locations related to fictional shows to destinations for enthusiasts. This creates a melding of real and imagined, fictional and idealized, constructing a lived experience from one which has only been showcased through a fantastical story. *The Walking Dead* has captured the largest and most-sought-after chunk of the 18–45- year-old market. As the zombie rages on the small screen, fans of the television show flock to the cobbled tour, taking visitors around Atlanta and through some of the areas included in the five seasons of the series. Trying to capitalize on the cult hit *Game of Thrones*, several companies now offer tours in Ireland and Iceland, taking pilgrims to key spots seen in pivotal scenes. British hit show *Doc Martin* uses the Cornish seaside village of Port Isaac – renamed 'Portwenn'[7] for the show – as the setting for its quirky, gentle comedy-drama. Though extremely different in their locations, cultural heritage, and context, each of the places has been literally reimagined through television, the behavior of visitors to these spaces, and the melding of a created, invented world with real-time consequences.

The second chapter will delve into the rituals, beliefs, and meaning applied to specific locations associated with legendary music icons and how such performance affects memory, commodity, and secular worship. Sonic pilgrimage has become a normative part of the participatory culture of rock music, perpetuating the importance and exalted status of key artists in a search for personal identity. Such trips also aide in creating a shared context for cultural belonging within a larger fan community. Key spots associated with some of Manchester, England's, most beloved bands – The Smiths, Joy Division, The Stone Roses – and iconic entities – Tony Wilson, Factory Records, the Haçienda – will allow for an in-depth look at how and why these places have become endowed with greater significance through the power of song.

Moving down to Barnes, a sleepy, upper crust borough located in outer London, the Marc Bolan Rock Shrine holds place of prominence and contrast

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[7]   Some places have it spelled 'Port Wenn', and others as one word, 'Portwenn'. For our purposes, the fictional village will appear from here as 'Portwenn'.

in a very affluent community. Erected on the spot where his car fatally hit a sycamore tree in 1977, the Shrine has received various accolades, including being recognized in 1999 by the English Tourist Board's publication of *England Rocks!* as one of the 113 'Sites of Rock "N" Roll Importance' in England. However, its placement – right in the middle of a neighborhood where studio apartments start at a cool £1 million – begs the question of its importance and staying power for the longer term; as each passing year ticks by since Bolan's death, the property prices get ever higher, and perhaps a feather boa, beer bottle-adorned tree, and glittery accoutrements may not be viewed as the best use of highly valuable real estate – not to mention what neighbors want to see when returning to their pricey abodes.

Comparing the tiny, under reported, 'do-it-yourself' character of the Bolan Shrine with spaces in the north – made famous through movies such as *24 Hour Party People*, *Control*, and *Live Forever* – provides the opportunity to examine fan behaviors, motivations, and beliefs at two radically different places centered on divergent figures. This gives insight into how technology, specifically social media platforms, allows for continued cultural investment and expanding importance placed upon such pop heroes within the context of both real and virtual space.

Chapter 3 will examine the tradition of literary tourism and how it has come to play an important role in maintaining an author's toe-hold in the current marketplace. It will also look at how modern mania has made holy shroud from even the most humble of accoutrements previously owned by famed writers and how this value evolves, mutates, and possibly distorts the original work itself. Using a variety of locations – the settings for Bram Stoker's legendary *Dracula*, the ties between Daphne du Maurier and Cornwall, Haworth and the Brontës – this chapter delves into the importance of space, real and imagined, for creating identity from the pages of a book.

The act of pilgrimage is not new; however, the variety of places on offer and deemed worthy of such behavior has grown exponentially over the last twenty years, as the internet has allowed for ever more divergent groups of communities to form and prosper through global engagement. This book sets out to support the thesis that secular pilgrimage to places of pop culture importance may be a new form of religion, as our ever more mediated world tells us that it is celebrity, technology, and often fame which is valued above all else.