

MICHAEL A. ELLIOTT
Towson University

Fandom as religion: A social-scientific assessment

ABSTRACT

My objective in this article is to outline both a conceptual and a methodological reframing of the 'fandom as religion' comparison from a social-scientific perspective. This comparison is familiar territory by now. It has survived the decades because there are, in fact, some striking similarities between fan devotion and religious devotion. However, there are some lingering issues that continue to hamper this field. As a result, I begin by discussing these issues in more detail and highlight how they can be problematic. Next, I discuss how fan devotion is better conceptualized as a sacred rather than a religious experience. Finally, I suggest suitable methods for gathering first-hand data from fans to test this association. On the whole, I believe this reframing will lead to a more accurate understanding of fandoms and chart a clearer path forward for scholars in this field.

KEYWORDS

Fandom; religion; sacred; Durkheim; social science; sociology

INTRODUCTION

The 'fandom as religion' comparison is familiar territory now, espoused by scholars and non-scholars alike to describe the intense devotion of fans to particular genres of popular culture (film, comic books, music, celebrities, etc.) in ways that are both serious and sarcastic. While it is not the most coherent or widely accepted research agenda in fandom studies, it is certainly one of the most persistent and provocative ones. Today, as fan communities continue to enjoy mainstream exposure and acceptance, it is a comparison that continues to be made, and for good reason. Indeed, there are some striking similarities between religious devotion and fan devotion. For example, much like religious pilgrims who make a sacred journey to a holy site, devoted fans travel far-and-wide to visit iconic sites that are intimately connected with their fandoms, such as King's Cross Train Station in London (for Harry Potter fans), Graceland in Memphis (for Elvis fans) or Comic-Con International in San Diego (for comic-con fans) (see recently Bickerdike 2016; Toy 2017). Likewise, in ways that resemble the intimate association between tribal identities and totemic symbols, sports fans adopt and adorn the symbols of their teams to signify devotion, delineate group identity and even link 'ancestral' fans across generations (Serazio 2012). And, similar to a charismatic religious ritual, music concerts involve specific rites, symbols and periods of emotional effervescence for devoted fans (Cavicchi 1998; Löbert

2012; Sylvan 2002).

Despite these similarities, some scholars are averse to this comparison because it promotes (in their opinion) a negative stereotype – that fan devotion is akin to religious fanaticism and therefore something irrational and extreme (Duffett 2013: 143; see also Jenkins 1992: 12–16). Others note the similarities between fandom and religion but are not willing to fully equate them (Cavicchi 1998; Hills 2002; Rojek 2001; Ward 2011). And, some contend that this comparison is simply inaccurate and weakly supported (Duffett 2003; McCloud 2003; Reysen 2006). While I am sympathetic to those who are wary of this comparison because of the potential for negative stereotypes, as a social scientist I am more concerned with the conceptual clarity of this argument and the empirical evidence that is used to support it. Ultimately, we should not avoid the comparison simply because people may misrepresent it or even mock it. On the whole, previous studies have illuminated the diverse ways that fandoms can provide important meaning, purpose and identity to people, and they deserve serious scholarly attention. However, there are some lingering issues that continue to hamper this field and that should be addressed more systematically in order to strengthen the different empirical claims being made by scholars and to chart a more coherent path moving forward.¹

Specifically, many studies suffer from a lack of conceptual clarity in their comparisons. First and foremost, what is a religion? Too often, the meaning of religion is assumed, rather than explained, or scholars cherry-pick certain aspects of a religion that are clearly associated with fan devotion and then claim equivalence between the two. To confuse the comparison even further, a number of terms are often used interchangeably with religion, such as sacred, spiritual, cult and more. Similarly, it is not always clear what kind of comparison is being made. Are scholars arguing that pop culture fandoms *are* religions, are *similar to* religions or are *substitutes for* religions? Finally, there is little systematic data in this field to support or reject these claims. Many scholars rely on general observations or personal/anecdotal experiences, which are perfectly fine as exploratory efforts. However, there is a paucity of original data that has been gathered from fans themselves, using rigorous social scientific methods for example, which can be used to thoroughly evaluate how people experience their fandoms first-hand.

Therefore, my objective in this article is to outline both a conceptual and a methodological reframing of this field. First and foremost, I recommend we move away from the term ‘religion’ as a primary comparison and begin to conceptualize fan devotion in broader strokes as a ‘sacred’ experience. This is a more accurate comparison, based on current scholarship, but it also avoids the seemingly endless debate in religious

¹ I understand a ‘fandom’ as referring to both the central focus of fan enthusiasm and the community of people that share this enthusiasm.

studies about how to define religion. Below, I will sketch a broad conception of the sacred that recognizes the vast landscape of potential examples but that also corresponds with specific dimensions, which can be systematically observed and measured in relation to particular fan interests and experiences. Such observations could involve developing a range of survey and interview questions that operationalize these dimensions, or by extensive field observations that can describe fan experiences in concrete detail. To this end, I will begin by discussing some of the lingering issues in this field in more detail and highlight how they can be problematic. Next, I will discuss how fan devotion is better conceptualized as a sacred rather than a religious experience. Finally, I will suggest suitable methods for gathering first-hand data from fans to test this association. On the whole, I believe these suggestions can provide a clear and coherent direction for the field of fandom studies moving forward.

FANDOM AS RELIGION: LINGERING ISSUES

It is worth noting that comparisons between fandoms and religion have been made for decades, regarding sports (Brody 1979; Price 2004; Serazio 2012), movies (Gabler 1998; Lyden 2003), celebrities (Rojek 2001), popular music (Cavicchi 1998; Löbert 2012; Sylvan 2002), *Star Trek* (Jindra 1994), Elvis (Frow 1998; Doss 1999) and more. But, as others have noted (see Hills 2002: 118; McCloud 2003), one of the lingering problems in making this comparison is a lack of clarity about what constitutes a religion; sometimes the meaning of religion is assumed and never defined, and sometimes it is associated with a particular component that is emblematic of religious experiences such as emotional rituals, a moral code or pilgrimages. Therefore, the comparisons made are often loose and imprecise, leading to arguments that hastily conflate religion and fandoms as equivalent. While there may be intriguing similarities (e.g. how Graceland resembles a religious pilgrimage site or how music concerts resemble a charismatic religious ceremony) there may also be important differences, which a thorough comparison with religion would uncover. To be fair, religion is a complex phenomenon and the fact that scholars cannot agree on a definition does not help in this regard. Nonetheless, greater acknowledgement of this complexity is crucial if we want to make a more accurate and honest analysis. Moving forward, if we insist on comparing fandoms to religion, then we need to be clear about which scholarly approaches we are using, keeping in mind that there is no clear consensus about how to define religion.

In general, definitions of religion fall under two categories – substantive and functional. Substantive definitions emphasize the content or substance of a religion, which is often based on human beliefs in something extraordinary that is beyond human capabilities.² In other words, it attempts to pinpoint the central object of people's devotion, be it a god or gods,

² Various terms for this include superhuman, supernatural, super-empirical and supramundane (once again, scholars cannot agree on a common term).

spirits, essences, forces or powers, and the beliefs and practices that surround those objects. Here, it might seem logical to assert that fandoms centred around particular celebrities or sports teams clearly correspond to a substantive definition of religion. After all, some celebrities and athletes can be given exceptionally elevated status in society, with large and stable followings of fans who engage in various activities to signify their intense devotion and adoration. However, there is also reason to be sceptical of designating these fandoms as religions based on a substantive definition. Unlike the god of a religion, for example, celebrities and sports teams are human; they are not 'beyond human'. What about a comic book superhero, you might ask? Of course, superheroes can be superhuman. But, consider this: those who believe in a god also believe that their god is 'real', not fictional. While we can recognize that Superman is real as a fictional character who has countless devoted fans spanning many decades, this is not quite the same as believing in the worldly or other-worldly existence of a god or power that one can commune with in some way. Although the sincerity and intensity of devotion may be similar, the central object of devotion is not the same.

Functional definitions, on the other hand, emphasize the effects that religion has on groups and their members. For example, it is often recognized that religions function to give meaning to life, provide a moral code and generate group solidarity among members.³ As Furseth and Repstad (2006: 16) concisely state, substantive definitions tell us what religion *is*, while functional definitions tell us what religion *does*. Since they are not confined by the recognition of something beyond human capabilities, functional definitions cast a broader net and capture a wider array of potentially religious activities. Indeed, it is possible that fandoms can give meaning to life, provide a moral code and generate group solidarity and identity among members. But, we also need to be careful about designating fandoms as religions based on functional similarities for two main reasons. First, as discussed below, functional effects need to be empirically demonstrated with systematic observations, not just presumed or inferred based on anecdotal observations. This field will be greatly strengthened if scholars can show, first-hand, how fandoms give meaning to members' lives, provide moral codes or generate group solidarity and identity. Second, we need to keep in mind that equating fandoms with religions based on functional similarities also stretches the concept of religion to potentially include very diverse forms of devotion that have significant dissimilarities (e.g. *Star Trek* and Buddhism). This can render the term amorphous and more akin to an analogy that makes general comparisons but glosses over the distinctiveness of what are commonly understood as organized religions. As a result, some have adopted derivative or hyphenated terms to describe devoted fandoms, such as neo-religion, para-religion, quasi-religion or implicit religion, which explicitly recognize the similarities to religion but also make distinctions of varying degrees.

³ See Christiano et al. (2016) and Furseth and Repstad (2006) for concise overviews of definitions of religion.

For example, Matt Hills (2002: 118, original emphasis) claims that '[f]andom both *is* and *is not* like religion, existing between "cult" and "culture"'. Ultimately, he believes the crux of this comparison is how fans appropriate the discourse of religion and cult to describe their fan experiences and, therefore, prefers the term *neo-religiosity*. Pete Ward (2011) explores the connection between celebrity worship and religion and uses the term *para-religion* to describe the similarities and differences between the two.

Para-religion is based on the premise that celebrity worship is not a religion but has religious parallels [...] In celebrity worship there are moments when the sacred appears to be present, but this is often subverted or interrupted by the irreverent.

(Ward 2011: 80)

Chris Rojek also grapples with the connections between celebrity culture and religion.

Celebrity culture motivates intense emotions of identification and devotion, but it is basically a fragmented, unstable culture that is unable to sustain an encompassing, grounded view of social and spiritual order. Nonetheless, some elements of celebrity culture do have a sacred significance for spectators.

(Rojek 2007: 179–80)

Jennifer Porter draws one of the strongest connections between pop culture fandoms and religion, using the term *implicit religion* to describe their similarities.

[Fandoms] are, or at least can be, a place that embodies a person's and/ or a community's expression of the essence of all meaning: what it means to be human, to be in community, to be in space and time, to be moral or immoral, to be finite or eternal, to simply be. As a result, pop culture fandoms are implicitly religious.

(Porter 2009: 277)

While these terms seek to grapple with both the similarities and differences between fandoms and religion, and do not assume equivalence, their proliferation can be a little confusing. For example, what is the difference between a neo-religion, a para-religion, a quasi-religion and an implicit religion? Does each term refer to a unique parallel with religion, such that celebrity worship can only be a para-religion, for example? Or, can they be used to describe more than one fandom, meaning they can overlap and be somewhat interchangeable terms? Regardless of how it is hyphenated (para-, neo-, quasi-), organized religion is still the main reference point. In other words, when scholars use a hyphenated term, they are still invoking or implying a particular meaning of religion, which means they cannot avoid the same lingering issue – what does the author mean by 'religion'? Thus, we need to be clear about what these terms mean, as well as how they are related to religion, so that future work can also employ them and identify similar

cases. This includes two related issues. One, how are fandoms related to religion, exactly? Are they *equivalent to* religion, *similar to* religion or *substitutes for* religion? These are three different empirical claims about the religious nature of fandoms and their role in society, and they should be addressed separately. Instead, these claims are sometimes lumped together as if they were equivalent. Two, how is religion related to things that are sacred, cult-like and spiritual? As seen in some of the quotes above, scholars frequently use these terms as if they were synonymous with religion, but they have distinct connotations in religious studies (see Smith 2014: 1–3, 2017: 20–76). These two issues further muddy the water when it comes to understanding what is meant by religion and how it compares to fandoms in contemporary society.

While a precise definition of religion is not necessary, I would argue that a general lack of clarity and attention to its meaning has created enduring confusion about how, and to what degree, fandoms resemble religions (or cults or spiritual experiences). Moving forward, it would help if scholars were more precise about their emphasis on a substantive and/or functional approach. In addition, given the lack of scholarly agreement about definitions, scholars can also look to common *dimensions* of religion, such as beliefs, practices, ethics or community affiliations, as a way to operationalize definitions into observable and measurable components (see Vaillancourt 2008 for an overview). In other words, dimensions can be used to help describe distinctive features that are common to religions and organize formal comparisons to different fandoms. Nevertheless, while there is certainly room for future comparisons to be more systematic and precise, I believe that fandoms are more accurately understood as sacred (rather than religious) experiences. Below, I explore what is commonly meant by ‘the sacred’, specify common dimensions that can be used to observe and measure sacred experiences and suggest common methods for gathering first-hand data from fans to test this association.

FANDOMS AS SACRED EXPERIENCES

As a social-scientific objective, differentiating *secular* experiences of the sacred from *religious* experiences can greatly expand our understanding of human behaviour and the myriad ways that people come to experience something powerful, transcendent and deeply meaningful in their everyday lives. Durkheim’s famous analysis in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* is certainly an inspiration in this regard. But, his definition of religion in terms of ‘beliefs and practices relative to sacred things’ ([1912] 1995: 44) has also led to an inevitable conflation of the two, such that scholars often refer to religion and sacred (and spiritual) as virtually synonymous. The two can be closely related, as religion is a prime source of the sacred. But there are many other sources of the sacred that are not religious. This is because, as scholars of culture since Durkheim have long recognized, the sacred is a social process of externalizing and dramatizing fundamental features of society (Berger 1967; Boli 1995; Geertz 1973). Thus, historically, the clan or tribe was a fundamental unit of social organization that was intimately sacred and the primary source of group identity, heritage and culture; agricultural processes that were central to daily life could also be sacred, inspiring seasonal rituals and association with higher powers;

and duty to the chieftain, communion with the spirit world or valour in battle were also sacred purposes among different peoples (Service 1978).

Today, the sacred is no less common and can also be found in relation to fundamental features of society outside the domain of religion. Indeed, as some have argued, the nation is sacred; it is a prime source of identity, heritage and culture with powerful symbols, origin myths and rituals; it represents fundamental values – freedom, equality, democracy – which are themselves sacred; and it can inspire and demand the ultimate sacrifice (death) on its behalf (Bellah 1967; Koenigsberg 2009; Lynch 2012a, 2012b; Marvin and Ingle 1996). Likewise, the individual has supplanted the clan or tribe as the fundamental unit of social organization. Over time, individuals have been granted an expansive array of human rights, freedoms and entitlements, which are grounded in the belief that every human being is fundamentally equal, sacred and inviolable (Elliott 2007; Joas 2008). In the political realm, ideologies such as Marxist-Leninism have inspired revolution and the restructuring of society in line with sacred beliefs, principles and the heroic deeds of their founders (Ellul 1975; Boli 1980). And presidential candidates such as Barack Obama are far more successful when they can present themselves as powerful representatives of sacred ideals of civil life while simultaneously linking their opposition to qualities that profane civil life in compelling, binary ways (Alexander 2010).

Given decades of research in fandom studies, I believe that the social sciences need to consider popular culture more seriously as a fundamental feature of society that can be sacralized in different ways by different people. To be fair, there have been many attempts in this field to apply Durkheim's insights from *The Elementary Forms*, particularly regarding totems, rituals and collective effervescence (see recently Duffett 2012; Jones 2015; Löbert 2012; Serazio 2012). However, I believe these efforts should be situated within a broader conception of fandoms as sacred, first and foremost. In other words, fans adopt and adorn totems, perform specific rituals and experience collective effervescence precisely because their fandoms have been sacralized in some way. While I will not present an historical overview of terminological uses of the sacred here (see Anttonen 2000), it is important to specify what is generally meant by this concept in order to avoid the same pitfalls as the appropriation of religion described above.

Overall, my approach is inspired by cultural approaches in the social sciences, such as those referenced above, as well as recent efforts to develop a sociology of the sacred that explores a secular landscape of devotional experiences beyond conventional religion as the basic point of reference (Demerath 1999, 2007; Landman 2009; Lynch 2012a, 2012b; Smith 2014). There is tremendous variation in this landscape, as there is across the religious landscape. However, while this has led to considerable debate about what it means to be a religion, there seems to be greater consensus about what it means to be sacred. As Anttonen notes,

Notwithstanding the subtleties of theological exegesis, there is no mystery or

secrecy concealed in the term ‘sacred’. It is obvious that the concept needs its own peculiar logic of understanding, according to the peculiar system of belief where it is used; but it also has a commonsense aspect, which is readily observable to anyone who bothers to give the concept a second thought.
(2000: 271)

Once again, Durkheim laid the foundation in the early twentieth century. As summarized by Pickering (1984: 126–29), Durkheim’s sociology of religion referred to the sacred as that which is: consecrated or holy, set apart from the profane, esteemed and not to be desecrated, dignified and transcendent, and powerful (in either a benevolent or malevolent sense). The profane is an important counterpart of the sacred, since it refers to things that are ordinary and mundane, or purely idiosyncratic and individualistic; in this sense, it is the antithesis of things that are collectively viewed as powerful and holy. But, equally important, Durkheim also referred to the profane as something sacrilegious that could desecrate and defile the sacred (Pickering 1984: 133–35).

Christian Smith elaborates on this foundation. He defines the sacred as ‘things set apart from the profane and forbidden to be violated [...] as if they were holy [...] [that] have particular powers to motivate and direct human action on their behalf and for their protection’ (2014: 1–2). Thus, sacred things are never ordinary or mundane, he explains, but are revered, inspiring and defended as sacrosanct. Also building on Durkheim, Gordon Lynch describes the sacred ‘as a social form that shapes communal identity, values and experiences of collective effervescence [...] [and] acts as a non-negotiable marker of essential values or boundaries’ (Lynch 2012a: 54). He emphasizes that there is a diversity of sacred forms in the secular world, and each can be associated with particular symbols, discourses, sentiments and practices by the groups that are drawn to them. More recently, Lynch defines the sacred in more general terms as ‘absolute, non-contingent realities which present normative claims over the meanings and conduct of social life’ (2012b: 29). Finally, Gary Laderman adds that ‘[w]hat is considered sacred becomes a vital source of empowerment and ultimate investments, and is connected to human inspirations and desires, meaningful actions and attitudes, and social identities and community affiliations’ (2009: xiv).

Since there is considerable overlap in these conceptions, I will not attempt to reorganize them into a new, oversized definition. Instead, I prefer to follow Demerath’s suggestion (1999: 8) of specifying common elements or dimensions of the sacred, instead of formulating an absolute definition. Definitions are necessarily broad since they need to distil the essence of many relevant examples, regardless of diversity. Dimensions, on the other hand, can be used to organize and specify some of this diversity while still seeing the commonalities between different examples. In addition, they can be used as guides for how to empirically measure particular aspects of a complex phenomenon. Based on the conceptions summarized above, I delineate seven dimensions of the sacred that are listed in Table 1 and described in more detail below. These seven dimensions are not exhaustive or exclusive and may

overlap to some degree.

Table 1: Dimensions of the sacred.

1	Special	Unique, important, extraordinary
2	Holy	Hallowed, blessed, worshipped; not to be desecrated
3	Powerful	Potent; garners respect, fear, awe
4	Transcendent/absolute	Above and beyond individual, everyday affairs
5	Inspiring	Empowers and motivates; evokes emotion
6	Meaning	Source of essential values and purpose
7	Identity	Shapes collective affiliation and personal identity
	<i>Profane</i>	<i>Mundane, idiosyncratic, sacrilegious</i>

Source: Durkheim ([1912] 1995), Laderman (2009), Lynch (2012a, 2012b), Pickering (1984), Smith (2014, 2017).

First, the sacred is special, not ordinary; it stands out as something unique, important and extraordinary. For many fans that are passionate about their interests, this dimension would certainly seem to apply. But this needs to be empirically demonstrated. For example, we need to evaluate how, and to what degree, fan interests play a unique and important role in people's lives and how they represent something beyond mere entertainment (if at all). This will vary from person to person, of course. To systematically evaluate the presence of this dimension among different fans, relevant questions to explore may include: What kind of activities do fans engage in? How often do they engage in them? Do fans set aside a particular time and place for their activities? Would it matter if they skipped their activities for a week or two?

Second, the sacred is holy; it is hallowed, blessed and worshipped. As such, it should never be defiled or desecrated. Two fan-related examples that come to mind for exploring this dimension are celebrities and collectables. Stereotypically, celebrity fans are associated with behaviours that could be explored more systematically as indicators that the object of their devotion is potentially holy: fans can regard celebrities as exceptional for particular traits that they possess (e.g. beauty, athleticism, charisma, singing and acting ability); they can shower praise and adoration on celebrities for exhibiting those traits; they can aspire to emulate celebrity lifestyles; in their presence, fans can express intense emotion and deference towards celebrities; and they can defend and protect celebrities from criticism by others. Collectables are another interesting example to consider for this dimension. Many fans collect particular objects that represent their fandom, such as a jersey, costume, artwork or toy. In order to explore their status as potentially holy, we need to know how they are used and what they mean to fans. Relevant questions to explore may include: Why do you collect particular objects to begin with (i.e. why *this* particular jersey, or *this* particular toy)? Where and how do you display it (e.g. in a frame or a glass case)? Do you handle it in a particular way (e.g. carefully or deferentially)? Do

you use it at a particular time and place (during a convention or a sporting event)? Is it off limits in any way, or not to be touched (e.g. 'mint in box')? These are just a sample of potential issues and behaviours that could be explored as indicators of this dimension, which will vary from fan to fan.

Third, the sacred is powerful; it is a potent force that garners great respect, fear and awe. The obvious *religious* example here is a deity or supreme force. As a result, this dimension may not be present among fandoms in the same way, if at all. Nonetheless, it may be worth exploring particular fandoms that are centred around a singular celebrity or character. Is the talent of a beloved celebrity akin to a powerful force that renders fans awe-struck? How do fans of a superhero or supervillain view their powers? Are they seen as merely exciting or thrilling components of an entertaining story, or do they symbolize something about the human condition that garners great respect, fear or awe? Once again, this is difficult to ascertain without getting detailed, first-hand information from fans.

Fourth, the sacred is transcendent and absolute; it is revered and dignified as something above and beyond the individual level of everyday affairs and is not contingent upon them. As above, it may be useful to consider the symbolic aspects of fan devotion in considering this dimension. Do fans valorize particular attributes of an athlete or fictional character (e.g. hard work, determination, heroism, bravery or moral righteousness) that extend beyond the athlete or fictional character and represent virtues that are absolute? Do fans recognize their own community (their fandom, if you will) as something larger than themselves, and as something that is admirable and enduring? These are deep and complex sentiments that, if present, will be challenging to systematically unpack with people.

Fifth, the sacred is inspiring; it empowers, motivates, evokes emotion and directs human behaviour on its behalf. While this dimension may certainly overlap with others, such that something that is *special* and *powerful* may also be inspiring, it specifies a different effect where the sacred emboldens and moves someone to change their behaviour in relation to it. Thus, regarding fandom studies, do characters, athletes or celebrities empower their fans to *feel* a particular way? Do they motivate them to *behave* in particular ways? Are these behavioural changes temporary and periodic, or more permanent and long term?

Sixth, the sacred provides meaning; it is a source of essential values and purpose. This may be closely related to the fifth dimension. For example, if a fan is motivated to feel and behave a particular way, what is this based on? Are there particular characteristics or accomplishments that someone (or something) represents to their fans that serve as a model of behaviour? Does being a member of a particular fandom correspond with a way of life? Has participation in a fandom transformed someone's life and given it new meaning? Once again, these are important but complicated questions to unpack.

Seventh, the sacred provides identity; it shapes collective affiliation and personal identity. For this dimension, there should be many examples in fandom studies that

highlight how engagement and association with particular fan interests define not only individual identity (e.g. I am a *Star Wars* fan) but the identity of an entire community of like-minded fans (e.g. *Star Wars* fandom). But we should also explore the role and importance of these identities. It is certainly worth asking people, for example: How central is your fanrelated identity in your life? How does it rank or compare to other roles and identities in your life based on occupation, marital status, race, age or gender? What kind of symbols do fans adorn to mark their affiliation with a particular fandom, such as tattoos, collectables or other material items?

Since the sacred can take a wide variety of forms, both religious and secular, we should not expect every dimension to be equally present across this landscape; some dimensions will be more relevant than others, depending on the example, and not every dimension has to be present for something to be sacred. Nonetheless, we can use them as concrete indicators that can be observed and measured to determine if, and to what degree, fandoms are sacred to their members. Below, I suggest particular methods to consider for gathering first-hand data from fans and measuring this association between fandoms and the sacred.

RESEARCHING SACRED EXPERIENCES

While these dimensions help make the sacred more concrete and visible, they still involve some abstract notions. For example, how do you ask a sports fan if their favourite venue or piece of memorabilia is holy? The meaning of the word ‘holy’ is not obvious and is usually associated with religious settings. Therefore, its direct use could be confusing, and its synonyms (hallowed, blessed, consecrated) are not necessarily any simpler. Likewise, how can we get fans to reflect on the deeper meaning and identity that their fan experiences provide. This requires unpacking multifaceted dimensions to obtain information about how fandoms may or may not provide a distinct identity, moral values and direction in life, as well as emotion and enthusiasm. Thus, a central issue is this: How do we measure these dimensions in such a way that is accurate yet comprehensible to the people we are talking to and observing? This depends on the method we use to gather our data and the creativity of the researcher.

Surveys or questionnaires, for example, are a good method for gathering general information from a large number of fans. These can be administered either in-person or online (or both), wherever fans tend to congregate. Unfortunately, there are few academic surveys in this field of study to draw from (see Kington 2015; McInroy and Craig 2018; Tsay-Vogel and Sanders 2017). As a result, we still need more systematic information about particular fandoms. Two important issues with this method relate to the survey sample and language of the questionnaire (Schuman 2002). First, how do we know if the people that we survey are representative of the population of fans under consideration, in terms of age, gender, race, income and education? Without systematic data about the composition of different fandoms, we need to rely on the researcher’s knowledge to know how and where to administer the survey in order to achieve a representative sample, or at least a diverse one. Second, as mentioned above, the language of the questionnaire is crucially

important as well. We should strive to construct questions that accurately measure particular dimensions and, at the same time, are interpreted reliably from person to person. This is tricky. Questions that ask fans about potentially powerful, transcendent and meaningful experiences will require some creativity, as well as trial and error, to make them consistently relatable. For starters, a potential question about the ‘meaning’ dimension of the sacred could ask respondents: ‘Have your fan interests taught you important values in your life?’ Potential answer choices could be ‘yes/no’ or arranged along a Likert scale to capture greater variation (i.e. strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree or strongly disagree).

To supplement the information from survey questions, which tend to include a range of predetermined answers, scholars can include open-ended questions to give fans an opportunity to expand on a particular response and provide more detail about their experiences. Thus, to follow up on the question above, one could ask: ‘If you “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the question above (or answered “yes”), what values have you learned through your fan interests?’ Likewise, follow-up interviews with fans can also be used to supplement survey data, or stand on their own as primary methods of data gathering. While interviews are more time-consuming to administer, they can help flesh out fan experiences in relation to sacred dimensions with more intimate, personal details. Nonetheless, issues of sampling and language are still valid here. Interview samples will be smaller than survey samples, but we should still try to achieve a diverse and representative group of interviewees. Likewise, our interview questions need to be phrased in such a way that they are consistently understood from person to person but also effectively tap into particular dimensions of the sacred. For example, to explore the ‘meaning’ dimension in this setting, one could ask broader questions that allow the interviewee to discuss their experiences in greater length: ‘Have your fan interests shaped how you live your life? How so? Do you see the world a particular way based on your fan interests? How so?’

Finally, participant observation or ethnographies are another tool for gathering first-hand data from fans. This method seems to be more common in fandom studies (see Bolling and Smith 2014, for example). Traditionally, ethnographic researchers directly observe social behaviour and activities as an outsider, but often while participating in those activities, as well as conversing and conducting in-depth interviews with participants (Adler and Adler 2003). In doing so, ethnographies strive to ‘give voice’ to participants by avoiding academic jargon and communicating a sense of how people converse in their own language, and to provide ‘thick descriptions’ that vividly describe participants’ stories and lives with colourful detail (Geertz 1973). Thus, as with any social scientific endeavour, these observations should be meticulous and systematic, rather than anecdotal or casual. And, while ethnographies require good rapport and trust with the participants under study, researchers should avoid getting too close or carrying preconceived notions into their work, such that they lose objectivity and provide biased accounts (Adler and Adler 2003). The traditional expectations of ethnography put a spotlight on so-called acafans (i.e. academics who identify as fans) (see Hills 2002; Jenkins 1992; Anon. 2020). On the one hand, being an acafan gives the researcher ‘insider

knowledge' of the world of participants and can foster trust and understanding. But, at the same time, the proximity of the acafan to the world of ethnographic participants poses potential risks of glorifying or overlooking particular aspects of fan life because they are already familiar with them. Nonetheless, this method can generate rich, detailed information about particular fans in a particular setting and should be a central tool for exploring potentially sacred experiences.

CONCLUSION

All things considered, the 'fandom as religion' comparison remains a provocative approach in fandom studies and has survived the decades because there are some striking similarities between fan devotion and religious devotion. However, many studies in this field suffer from lingering issues that lead to fuzzy and inaccurate comparisons. First and foremost, the specific meaning of religion tends to be assumed rather than defined, which makes the comparison unclear and difficult to scrutinize. Second, scholars can also cherry-pick one or two prominent features of religion that are clearly associated with fan behaviour and then claim equivalence between the two, which glosses over the complexity of religion and simplifies the comparison. Third, this comparison gets more confusing when scholars (a) are not clear about whether fandoms are *equivalent to* religion, *similar to* religion or *substitutes for* religion, (b) use other terms interchangeably with religion (e.g. cult, sacred, spiritual) or (c) introduce a plethora of hyphenated terms that are related to, but also distinct from, religion (e.g. para-religion, neo-religion, quasi-religion, implicit religion). Finally, there is little systematic data in this field to thoroughly test (and retest) the different claims that have been made over the years.

Moving forward, if we continue to make the 'fandom as religion' comparison, I believe our claims would be strengthened if greater attention were given to the complexities of religion and how it tends to be defined by scholars of religion. Indeed, fandom scholars need to be up-front about what they mean by religion. Are they employing a substantive understanding of religion or a functional one? What is the relationship between religion and fandoms, exactly? Using first-hand data from fans themselves would also be helpful in supporting the claims of fandom scholars. This can be gathered using tried-and-true social scientific methods such as surveys, interviews and/or ethnographies.

Nonetheless, while fandoms certainly share some striking similarities with religion, particularly functional similarities, I hesitate to designate them as religions per se. On the one hand, substantive definitions tend to emphasize a belief in something superhuman outside the realm of human experience. This does not apply well to fandoms, which are thoroughly grounded in human beings, human creations and human experiences. On the other hand, functional definitions are much broader and lead to greater overlap with fandoms. This is an intriguing line of inquiry, but comparisons based on functional similarities can stretch the category of religion to include very disparate examples, from pop culture to leisure activities to traditional religions, that have significant dis-similarities. As a result, broad functional comparisons risk rendering the term 'religion' more akin to an analogy rather than an

empirical term.

In my view, it is more accurate to view fandoms as sacred experiences. Religion is certainly a prominent source of the sacred, but there are many other sources that are not religious. Ultimately, fandoms are groups of enthusiasts that share a passion for particular aspects of popular culture (e.g. sports, science fiction and comic books) and that sacralize them and express their devotion, to varying degrees, through particular activities, symbols and sentiments. They are not devoted to something supernatural or superhuman beyond the realm of human experience. While they have proliferated and become highly organized in recent decades through the rise of social media and the internet, as well as conventions and festival events (see Elliott 2018), they are a *sacred* form that is based in a *secular* world – one among many. Moving forward, future research from this perspective can employ the dimensions of the sacred described above (special, holy, powerful, transcendent/absolute, inspiring, meaning and identity) as guides for clearly identifying, observing and measuring the presence or absence of the sacred among different fan communities. Overall, I believe this will lead to a more accurate understanding of fandoms and chart a clearer path forward for scholars in this field.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Michael A. Elliott is professor of sociology at Towson University and specializes in globalization, culture and social theory. He has published on the global expansion of human rights, world heritage and comic-con, as well as the development of monastic beer brewing in the Middle Ages and its connection to modern craft beer. Currently, he is working on a project about the sacred dimensions of fan communities in the United States.

Contact: Sociology, Towson University, 8000 York Road, Towson, MD 21252, USA.

E-mail: melliott@towson.edu

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9629-8643>

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