REAL VAMPIRES AS AN IDENTITY GROUP: ANALYSING CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF AN INTROSPECTIVE SURVEY BY THE VAMPIRE COMMUNITY

JOSEPH LAYCOCK

Introduction

When I first began doing ethnography with the Atlanta Vampire Alliance (AVA) in 2007, the self-identified vampires I met expressed irritation that scholars had presented their community as a religious movement. For most self-identified vampires, vampirism is not a ‘religion’ in the substantive sense of having an institution, sacred texts, a catechism, or religious leaders. Although some vampire groups do conform to this model of religion, they represent an increasingly small percentage of the so-called ‘real vampire community’. However, groups such as The Temple of the Vampire have received a disproportionate amount of attention from religion scholars, precisely because they are amenable to a substantive model of religion. For this reason, my article, “Real Vampires as an Identity Group,”* suggests that new models are needed to understand this community and its beliefs. Analysis focuses on an introspective survey of the vampire community carried out by the AVA through their LLC, Suscitatio Enterprises. The “Real Vampire and Energy Worker Research Survey” suggests a complex and multifaceted discourse about what being a ‘real vampire’ might mean. The survey also covers a broad range of discourses with questions about medical background, religious affiliation, socioeconomic status, and the consumption of popular culture. This attempt to define vampirism through a consensus gentium suggests that scholarly analysis of the real vampire community should focus less on institutions and more on ‘cognitive praxis’—that is, the ideas and identities that this community makes possible. In trying to understand the religious dimension of this community, the notion of ‘hyper-real religion’ is more useful than a substantive model.

There is an undeniable relationship between the real vampire community and fictional depictions of vampires, particularly in role-playing games such as Vampire: The Masquerade. Real vampires do not claim to be the beings portrayed in novels and films, however, they often argue

* An earlier version of this article appeared in Nova Religio, 14:1. It has been reproduced here with permission.
that popular culture provides useful vocabulary to describe metaphysical experiences that would otherwise be ineffable. Furthermore, in the 1990s, live action role-playing games served as an important venue where self-identified vampires could find one another. However, the real vampire community differs from other movements treated in this volume in that they have gone to great lengths to distinguish themselves from vampire role-playing games. This is due in large part to a double homicide committed in 1996 by Rod Ferrell, a sixteen-year-old self-identified vampire who also played *Vampire: The Masquerade*. The murders led to a moral panic and a fear that teenagers playing the role-playing game would lose track of reality and commit actual crimes. This narrative has now resurfaced with the success of the *Twilight* series. Several self-appointed ‘occult crime experts’ and evangelical leaders have suggested that teenagers who read *Twilight* will identify as actual vampires and commit murders.

Since 1996, both self-identified vampires and enthusiasts of vampire role-playing games have sought to dissociate from one another to avoid the narrative of ‘the delusional role-player’. The AVA deliberately sought to avoid soliciting responses from individuals engaged in role-playing games. The survey also asked self-identified vampires what vampire fiction they consumed and contained questions to assess whether respondents could distinguish terminology derived from role-playing games from terminology created by the real vampire community.

However, the attempts of groups like the AVA to extricate themselves from popular culture have been undermined by a trend towards ‘viral’ marketing and games that deliberately confuse fiction and reality. In 2008, HBO created an ersatz blog, *Bloodcopy*, to promote their television series, *True Blood*. *Bloodcopy* presented news and advertisements as if the premise of *True Blood* was reality. Actual news stories were presented alongside fictitious ones concerning the civil rights of vampires. *Bloodcopy* even falsely reported that it had been acquired by an actual blog, *Gawker*. *BusinessInsider* reported on this acquisition and was later forced to retract it. In its effort to further blur the lines between fiction and reality, *Bloodcopy* contacted the real vampire community online and attempted to draw them into the web of viral confusion.

Earlier this year, Merticus, my chief contact with the AVA, discovered a vampire role-playing game being played using Twitter accounts and a Ning social networking site created for the game. Players were assuming the roles and online identities of actual members of the real vampire community. One player was posing as Merticus and, in the game, had been kidnapped by the Volturi—the antagonists of *Twilight*. Merticus’