“AN INFINITY OF EXPERIENCES.” HYPER-REAL PAGANISM AND REAL ENCHANTMENT IN WORLD OF WARCRAFT

STEF AUPERS

Introduction

It’s from the death of God that religions emerge . . .

(Baudrillard 1994: 26)

In *The God Delusion* well-known atheist and out-spoken critic of religion Richard Dawkins (2006) triumphantly states that the Bible is fiction. Scientists, biblical scholars and historians, he argues, have undermined the factuality, and hence the literal interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, and this makes the existence of a God incredible. As such, he continues, there is no distinction between the Bible, legends as ‘factually dubious’ as the stories of King Arthur and popular fantasy fiction: “The only difference between *The Da Vinci Code* and the gospels is that the gospels are ancient fiction while the *The Da Vinci Code* is modern fiction” (Dawkins 2006: 123).

Dawkins’ argument is deeply problematic. Not so much because he degrades the Bible to the realm of fiction but because of his typically positivistic assumption that sacred texts—once deconstructed, falsified and bereft of their ultimate truth claims—can never be at the basis of religiosity and spirituality. But is it true? Leaving aside the revival of fundamentalist groups involved in Biblical literalism in the United States, we can nowadays also detect a shift from a literal interpretation of the Bible to a more symbolic reading, an approach that has mainly developed since the 1960s in ‘new theology’ (Campbell 2007: 250–273). Obviously, factuality and literalism are not absolute conditions for religion to remain vital. Most important for this chapter, however, is the fact that the erosion of Christianity is accompanied by the rise of a new type of spirituality (Aupers and Houtman 2010; Campbell 2007; Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas et al. 2005; Houtman and Aupers 2007) that is often informed by or based on popular fiction (e.g. Partridge 2004; Possamai 2005; Schofield Clark 2003). Media products, like *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, *Star Trek*, *The X Files*, *Charmed*, *The Matrix*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and, indeed, *The Da Vinci Code*, are nowadays infused with religious, spiritual and metaphysical
worldviews and are, in turn, often treated as "sacred texts" (Partridge 2004) that are used to actively construct "subjective myths" (Possamai 2005) or private "systems of ultimate significance" (Luckmann 1967). Moreover, media texts and popular fiction are at the basis of new social forms of religion—of cult formation in real life and on the Internet—and motivate veritable "media pilgrimage" (Reijnders 2010).

In his pioneering work on this fiction-based type of spirituality Adam Possamai (2005) dubbed this "hyper-real religion," employing a concept from the work of Jean Baudrillard. In this chapter I will use a case study of so-called Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), most notably World of Warcraft, to provide an in-depth study of 'hyper-real religion'. I will analyze the way these ‘enchanting’ worlds on the Internet are constructed (or rather, designed) and if, how and why gamers derive spiritual meaning from play in these environments. The analysis is based on multiple sources, but mainly on a content analysis of four popular online computer games (Ultima Online, Everquest, Dark Age of Camelot and World of Warcraft) and about twenty qualitative in-depth interviews with Dutch players of World of Warcraft.

The qualitative nature and hence particular focus on (spiritual) meaning in this study is relevant for at least two reasons. First of all, most academic studies of fiction-based religions are still mainly explorative and sensitizing; they point out that fiction and spirituality are combined in the contemporary spiritual milieu without analyzing, in more empirical detail, how and why particular ‘texts’ are productive in the formation of contemporary spirituality. On a more theoretical note, however, it seems that real spiritual meaning based on popular fiction is not only under studied in the social sciences, it is often a priori denied. Obviously, this is the position taken by advocates of secularization, like Bruce (2002) or Dawkins (2006), mentioned in the introduction. But even Possamai’s fruitful conceptualization of fiction-based spirituality as ‘hyper-real religion’ and the argument that it is part and parcel of the ‘cultural logic of late capitalism’ has strong connotations of it being essentially ‘superficial’, ‘meaningless’, ‘unreal’ or ‘alienating’ since it is based on the critical, neo-Marxist theories of Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson. ‘Hyper-real religion’, from this perspective at least, is an oxymoron since ‘real religious meaning’ and the ‘hyper-real’ are by definition incompatible. On the basis of this study of World of Warcraft, particularly through an analysis of the meanings players attribute to the game, I hope to demonstrate that this dichotomous and implicitly moral picture is deeply problematic.