



## The difference between religious narratives and fictional literature: a matter of degree only

Anders Klostergaard Petersen

To cite this article: Anders Klostergaard Petersen (2016) The difference between religious narratives and fictional literature: a matter of degree only, *Religion*, 46:4, 500-520, DOI: [10.1080/0048721X.2016.1221670](https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2016.1221670)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2016.1221670>



Published online: 29 Aug 2016.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 121



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)



Citing articles: 2 [View citing articles](#)

# The difference between religious narratives and fictional literature: a matter of degree only

---

Anders Klostergaard Petersen\*

*Department of the Study of Religion, Aarhus University, Jens Chr. Skous Vej 3, Aarhus, Denmark*

The existence of fiction-based religion makes it obvious to examine the relationship between fictional literature and religious narratives. Although the fiction-religion distinction is tangentially related to the faction-fabrication divide, the author argues that they do not amount to the same. Rather than pursuing the question of what differentiates fictional from religious narratives, the author focuses on those elements in fictional literature that enable interpretative communities to attribute them a religious character. Three assertions come to the fore of the discussion. He considers them crucial for how narratives may be attributed a religious nature: (1) narratives may be assigned religious status in so far as they include a repertoire of p-s-t-coordinates (person, space, and time) that allows elements of the story-world to be projected onto an actual landscape; (2) narratives may be ascribed religious status in so far as they include agents with counter-intuitive abilities who are capable of intervening in the world of the ordinary recounted figures. By virtue of this contrast, distinguishing the characters in the story-world, the relationship between counter-intuitive agents and ordinary persons may be transposed onto a comparable distinction between different worlds in the world of the interpretative community; and (3) narratives may be assigned religious status in so far as they by virtue of embedded discourses and openness or indeterminacy with respect to p-s-t-coordinates, invite readers to view their own lives in continuity with the recounted world.

KEY WORDS fiction and religion; religious discourse; counter-intuitiveness; semiotics; cognitive science

## Introduction

It is not easy to disentangle the threads which weave fictional literature and religious narrative together. Provisionally, one may think of the two types of literature as different by nature, but the distinction between fiction and religion is ultimately one that has to do with the epistemological stance on the specific text. One's overall hermeneutical standpoint determines the particular sense of reality ascribed to a given text. In terms of content, however, the distinction between fictional and religious narrative may not necessarily have as great a bearing as is often thought. At the very least, the question is considerably more moot than the seemingly obvious

---

\*Email: [akp@cas.au.dk](mailto:akp@cas.au.dk)

divide between fiction and religious narrative implies. One person may, for instance, imbue the Gospel of Mark with a strong sense of reality holding the text to be a quite accurate representation of factual events that took place around 30 CE and accordingly understanding the text as a piece of 'faction' and not fabrication. Yet, another person may conceive of the same text as basically a myth, that is, a piece of fiction, perhaps valuable in its own right by virtue of constituting an exemplar of literature, but not to be assigned value as a reflection of historical events. Such a preliminary observation, however, appears spatially and temporally strongly determined. It is confined to a particular cultural context in which the distinction between fictional and factual, mythical and historical literature, is being taken for granted. Although one can point to predecessors to such a differentiation, it is, at the end of the day, a distinction that presupposes the emergence of historicism, in the middle of the 19th century, in North-Western Europe. Once again, we are confronted with problems of a knotty character. Is it, for instance, legitimate to juxtapose the differentiation between fictional and religious narrative with a distinction between fiction and faction? Not really, since such a conflation would imply that religion and faction amounts to the same, which – needless to say – would be a dubious viewpoint to endorse given that religious literature is characterised by eluding historical examination in several respects.

In order not to be misunderstood, let me emphasise that I do not question the importance of exposing all religious texts to historical examination; but when it comes to elements such as, for example, miracle stories, the historian can, by virtue of the epistemology of science, only relate to them as such, that is, as fictional narratives or mythical fabrications. Obviously, such an assessment does not reduce the importance of historical studies, since miracle stories also emerge in particular spatial contexts and eras. Yet, in terms of content the historian has by virtue of his or her commitment to an overall scientifically grounded epistemological stance to repudiate the reference to reality which the miracle story seemingly claims to represent. So, we cannot place the distinction between fabrication and faction on an equal footing with the differentiation between fictional and religious narrative, despite the fact that religious literature, contrary to fiction, is often held to arrogate to itself the claim to reality. Due to this contention, we need to return to the point of factuality pertaining to religious narratives, since it has a great bearing on the question of the relationship between fictional and religious narrative.

There is one other important point which has to be taken into consideration. We have to be careful not to fall victim to another form of naivety, namely that of attributing to people of the past, or people outside a modern Western cultural context (which today obviously includes a much greater part of the world), a sense of credulity which does not match the textual evidence. On the basis of the previous ruminations, some may be tempted to argue that the careful distinction between fabrication and faction reflects a modern stance. Some are likely to argue that retrojecting this distinction onto worlds that either predate the emergence of, or lie outside, the influence of historicism is anachronistic and therefore a token of bad scholarship. True as this may be, one needs to be cautious not to ascribe epistemological imprudence to the worlds of pre-historicism. Regardless of the specificity of the interpretative filters through which people of antiquity, for instance, experienced the world, one should never forget the basic hermeneutical premise

concerning the oneness or sameness of the world.<sup>1</sup> The emphasis placed on the oneness of the world should constitute an axiomatic epistemological point of departure for all scholars studying culture.

What appears counter-intuitive in the reading of, for instance, New Testament texts today, was not less counter-intuitive in the ancient world. If a narrative telling about Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee or raising somebody from the dead involves representations that for a modern audience are counter-intuitive, it is important to stress that these elements were no less counter-intuitive for an audience of the late 1st century CE when the gospel literature came into existence.<sup>2</sup> It may well be that people of this period were likely to accept religious texts in which beings belonging to the ontological category of PERSON could be ascribed counter-intuitive abilities such as walking on material which no other exemplar of the PERSON category could walk on, but that does not mean that these representations were any less counter-intuitive for an ancient audience.<sup>3</sup>

In the story about Jesus resuscitating the daughter of Jairus (Mark 5:21–24.35–43), Jairus, one of the rulers of the synagogue, comes to Jesus and pleads with him to cure his daughter who lies at the point of death. Subsequent to an intermediary healing in which a woman suffering from a discharge of blood for 12 years is cured by touching the garment of Jesus from behind, people from Jairus' household enter the scene. They tell him that by now his daughter has died and discourage him from troubling Jesus. Jesus, however, encourages Jairus to invest faithfulness (*monon pisteue*, 5:36b). At the time they arrive at Jairus' house, they are met by a group of people weeping and wailing loudly on behalf of the deceased. Jesus, however, asks them why they are making all this commotion, since the little girl is not dead but only sleeping (5:39). At this point, they are all said to laugh at him (*kategelōn*, 5:40a). Such a statement clearly demonstrates my point that people in antiquity also oscillated between different representations of reality. The statement about the wailing is a narrative expression of the objection to Jesus' counter-intuitive claim that the girl is not dead but only sleeping and, thereby, has been resuscitated to life. I shall leave this discussion between different

---

<sup>1</sup>In placing emphasis on the one- or sameness of the world, I am indebted to Professor Ole Davidsen who initially opened my eyes to semiotics and the importance of theory of science as a basic point of departure for anybody engaged in the study of religious texts. Much of what I am presenting in this essay owes a great debt to years of conversation with Davidsen whose 1993 monograph (Davidsen 1993) should constitute a prerequisite reading for any person engaged with the relationship between fictional and religious literature.

<sup>2</sup>Boyer underlines that counter-intuitiveness does not necessarily amount to something strange, abnormal, extraordinary, odd or even surprising. It is a *terminus technicus* that designates information which contradicts information provided by the involved ontological categories. So, for example, the ontological category of human being implies a PERSON who by virtue of his or her capacities is bound to stay on the ground and cannot hover in the air (Boyer 2001, 65). A flying person certainly is counter-intuitive, but whether it is strange or abnormal depends on one's interpretative framework. If one has been brought up in a culture full of stories of people flying in the air, such a representation is not unusual or extraordinary.

<sup>3</sup>Paul Veyne emphasises how the ancient Greeks also oscillated between different representations of reality, whereby they acknowledged the existence of contradictory views of the world that dependent on the context could be subscribed to in particular situations. He dubs this pendulation between different representations of reality as 'mental Balkanisation' (a term coined in 1983 years before the outbreak of the Civil Wars in former Yugoslavia). See Veyne (1988, 41–57, esp. 56).

representations of reality and proceed to focus on the similarly important question concerning how texts instantiate themselves.

### The semi-autonomous nature of texts

Many scholars will be hesitant, verging on rejection, to accept an understanding which implies a notion of textual autonomy that assigns to the text a certain degree of independence regardless of how the actual reader may conceive of the text. In the wake of various forms of post-modernism, theorising on literature has made it a truth that texts only come alive in the hands of their readers or the interpretative communities which have formed those readers.<sup>4</sup> The readers shape the textual mould and interpret it in accordance with the interpretative habits of the socio-cultural context to which they belong. Yet, despite all the legitimacy of placing emphasis on texts in the hands of the interpretative communities or readers who are using them, I insist on the value of an analytical approach which acknowledges a certain degree of autonomy of the text. Texts not only represent floating signifiers which obtain their meaning in the meeting with actual recipients. By virtue of being semantic universes, texts also have a semi-autonomous existence independent of particular readers' engagement with them. If this were not the case, it would be impossible to embark on any form of textual analysis on which we could possibly ever come to terms.

Texts exercise power over their readers not only by imposing a particular semantic universe on their readers, but also by enforcing on their readers a course through which they become initiated and overtaken by this universe. It goes without saying that readers are free to criticise and to challenge the universe inculcated on them, but such activities are departures from the default engagement with the text and hence only demonstrate the very power of the text's semantic universe. Readers assign values to the various signs used by the text on the basis of interpretative conventions with which he or she is familiar, but there is a great difference between relating to the activation of the reader regarding instantiating conventions through which he or she interprets the text and to talk about texts as being entirely exposed to the caprices of readers. An understanding which acknowledges the power of the text as well as the role of the reader in the textual reception is advantageous over and against alternative understandings that make interpretation a matter of the exposure to the pleasure of the readers only.

In saying this, it is important to acknowledge that I do not over-emphasise the importance of textual autonomy. The argument presupposes that textual independence can only be semi-autonomous by nature in as much as texts are always read by concrete readers who interpret the text through the particular cultural and personal perceptual filters through which they sift the world.<sup>5</sup> That said, I still think it

---

<sup>4</sup>See, for instance, Fish (1980). In direct contrast to Fish, Davidsen has written an article with the telling title 'Is There a Monkey in the Class?' in which he argues for the semi-autonomous character of the textual world independent of the community of readers (1995).

<sup>5</sup>In this regard, I subscribe to an understanding resembling one that Eco voiced in his later work. Here Eco spoke about the limits of interpretation and develops a distinction between textual use and interpretation. As regards use, texts may be employed in a variety of ways, which in principle is infinitely open and thus unlimited. Eco humorously points out that one may tear out a page from a Bible and use it to light one's pipe. This is, of course, an excessive form of use; but the crucial point is that the limits to the textual use only depend on the reader in question. Regarding interpretation, however, there are certain restrictions imposed on the interpreter by the semantic universe of the text as well as by the way it

is crucial to accentuate the semi-autonomous character of texts with the accent placed on the text rather than the reader. A trained analyst interested in the textual world will attempt to interpret the text on the basis of the socio-cultural conventions available to the intended audience of the text at the time and the place of its composition. Thereby, the analyst strives – as much as this can possibly be done – to reduce the level of presentism involved in the interpretation.<sup>6</sup> And even in cases in which the reader is not a member of the guild of schooled interpreters, texts continue to exert power on their readers by virtue of the two dimensions I previously referred to: (1) the basic mould of the semantic universe of the text in question into which the reader is fitted; and (2) the textual course by which the text strives to impose itself on its readers.<sup>7</sup>

I do not subscribe to Eco's particular way of phrasing the tension between text and reader as one between *intentio operis* and *intentio lectoris*, since these terms suggest a symmetrical relationship between the two entities involved. However, I concur with his basic acknowledgement of the two aspects as constituting respectively the stance of the reader towards the text in question and the partly independent semantic universe of the text, as well as his recognition that the two dimensions do not amount to the same. They need to be kept analytically at distance from each other, if we are to avoid conflating distinct interpretative levels.

### Fictional and religious narratives

In addition to these introductory observations we also have to note that four decades of biblical scholarship – in the wake of literary studies – has conspicuously demonstrated how time-honoured scriptural narratives such as, for instance, the

---

attempts to impose its world-view on its audience. The purpose of interpretation is to analyse the textual meaning understood as the historically operative function of the text (Eco 1990, 57f.). In this context Eco's concept of codes plays a decisive role, since he endorses the view that the interpretative endeavour should pay close heed to the codes which are assigned the role of exerting constraints on the interpretation (Eco 1979, 130–135, 145, 274 and 1992, 64–66). For a slightly different approach but working with similar concepts, see Jameson (1978, 516f.), who distinguishes between textual sense (*Sinn*) and meaning (*Bedeutung*). The latter designates the meaningfulness of a gesture read back from the situation to which the text is held to provide a response, and the former denotes the inner textual structure and syntax.

<sup>6</sup>As is obvious from the argument, I draw on the traditions of particularly French (Greimas) and Italian (Eco) semiotics, but the Peircean tradition could also be adduced to make the point as may be seen from Eco's inspiration from this trajectory. However, when it comes to interpretation of texts and the question of analysing texts in light of their historical context I find the French-Italian semiotic tradition more suited than the Peircean one, since the former is particularly focused on textual interpretation. As to the precise use of the concept of convention, I rely on Eco subsequent to his turn from 'codes' to 'conventions'. The concept 'convention' – characteristic of the research of the older Eco – is advantageous over the notion of codes which conduces readers to think that a 1:1-relationship exists between signifiers and their transposition into new signifiers. It is preferable to conceptualise the relationship in a less rigorous manner in such a way that signifiers are understood to lead to the production of new signs which by virtue of cultural habits are constrained in their detachment from the signifiers which prompt them. Once again, however, it is crucial to acknowledge the role of the analyst in this process by underlining that there is no natural relationship between signs and their engendering of new signs.

<sup>7</sup>Presumably this is what Eco has in mind with the concept *intentio operis* meant to convey that a plausible textual interpretation of a particular text portion can only be retained on the basis that it is confirmed and not rejected by the interpretation of any other portion, Eco (1990, 58–63, and especially p. 59): 'In this sense (the relationship between part and whole, AKP) the internal textual coherence controls the otherwise uncontrollable drives of the reader.'

gospel literature of formative Christ-religion may be read along the same lines as contemporaneous as well as modern pieces of fictional literature.<sup>8</sup> Scriptural texts endorse literary techniques similar to those of fiction, they are often formulated in genres parallel to contemporary fictional literature, they frequently subscribe to the same modes and sub-genres, and they implement corresponding stylistic elements in order to persuade their audiences to adopt their views. One could continue listing resemblances, but the point should be clear: the resemblances between fictional and religious narratives are *legio*, whether one takes a look at current fiction or examines narratives contemporaneous with past scriptural literature but being of a more profane nature.<sup>9</sup>

From the other end of the spectrum, that is, what we now designate fictional literature, something similar may be said with regard to the correlated nature between religious narratives and fictional literature. Laura Feldt has called attention to the resemblances between modern fantasy literature and ancient religious texts. Both genres may be seen to use counter-intuitive elements in the recounted world of the texts (2011, 2012, 2016). Whether the characters are hovering in the air on flying broomsticks or are walking on water is just a matter of the specific manifestation of the counter-intuitiveness at play. The one constitutes a break with the category ARTEFACT (broomsticks usually cannot fly), whereas the other represents a break with the ontological category PERSON (persons in general do not walk on water). Similarly, but taking the analysis of the relationship between fictional and religious narrative one step further, Markus Davidsen has cast light on the phenomenon of fiction-based religion in which literary aficionados of the worlds of, for instance, Tolkien's literary mythology and *Star Wars* have founded religions on the basis of the texts which they cherish (Davidsen 2012, 2013, 2014; 2016. For *Star Wars* specifically, see Possamai 2005; Davidsen 2016).

In terms of asserted referentiality, the religious use of fiction is considerably more excessive compared to the religious interpretation of, say, the Christian Gospels, as the foundational texts of fiction-based religions – texts such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* – on their own do not purport to mirror factual worlds. Yet, as also discussed by Markus Davidsen in his contribution to this theme issue it is important to specify the type of referentiality adherents of fiction-based religion attribute to the works they consider authoritative for their religiosity. None of the Jediists and only a small minority of practitioners of Tolkien spirituality actually consider the storyline of respectively *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings* to be referentially true. In fact, adherents of fiction-based religion have no problem in acknowledging the altogether fictional nature of the works on which they base their religious views. At the same time, however, they extract from these works some supernatural agents whom they consider to be real (for instance, the Force in the case of Jediism, and the Valar, the lower gods in Tolkien's mythology, in the case of Tolkien spirituality). Obviously, one may discard such phenomena by pointing to

---

<sup>8</sup>Since my primary expertise is in Graeco-Roman religion, Second Temple Judaism, and formative Christ-religion, I shall confine myself to examples from these religions and periods. Yet, I think the argument is not exclusive to these religions and their texts. Texts from other ancient religions and contemporary religions may be adduced as well.

<sup>9</sup>The literature in this field is immense, but obvious examples are, for instance, the abundant literature that exists on the Gospels and the slightly later vast literature of Acts of individual apostles such as Peter and Andrew with contemporaneous novelistic Graeco-Roman literature.



their predictably ephemeral nature. To what extent, for instance, is it likely that the Temple of the Jedi Order will exist in 50 years? Yet, as easy as it may be to dispense with such phenomena on the basis that they only represent the whims of a particular, although in terms of number impressive segment of the Western world of the late 20th and early 21st century, it may be worthwhile to explore in more detail the relationship between religious and fictional literature. The very fact that some people can and do assign referentiality to aspects of fictional worlds by turning them into foundations of religious world-views calls for further investigation. Thereby, we may come to understand not only more about religious and fictional narratives but also about the means through which they instantiate their worlds and seek to impose them on their audiences. We may also obtain an enhanced understanding of what it is that in particular contexts lead different people to ascribe reality to textual worlds, whether in their entirety or by selecting particular elements from them. But not only shall we get a better grasp on this issue. Ideally, we may evolve a better understanding of how people can do this to such an extent that they take these worlds to represent not only the genuinely true world but also to overtrump the immediately, empirically accessible world by positing a counter-world which they ultimately claim to constitute the true world.

### **Fictionality and indexicality: it takes P-S-T coordinates for a narrative to be ascribed religious character**

At this point, some readers may reasonably object to the argument by raising the counter-question whether the search for relationships between religious texts and belletristic does not represent a very particular case void of the general bearing that I attribute to it. I do not think so. In fact, this is a crucial question which is well worth examining. The more so, since it has not received any special attention so far in the study of religion. Yet, before we proceed to discuss instances of religious narratives specifically, it is advantageous to look at some border phenomena which indicate that there may be more to the phenomenon pertaining to the relationship between fictional and religious literature than what one initially may be inclined to think. Pilgrimage for example is an institution that we traditionally relate to religion. Yet, we also find it in the context of fictional literature.

Arthur Conan Doyle never claimed that 221b Baker Street was anything but a fictional place in which he had his hero, Sherlock Holmes, live his life. But Doyle situated this fictional home within a factual place in the actual world of his intended audience (London, Baker Street). By doing so, he endowed his fictional world with a degree of familiarity whereby he not only enhanced the plausibility of the story-world but also made it more accessible and recognisable.<sup>10</sup> The home of

---

<sup>10</sup>Salter uses the earliest readers' inclination to attribute reality to Sherlock Holmes as an instance of what he designates the ironic imagination, a mode characteristic of people's search for enchantment in a disenchanted modern world (2004, 139, 146):

Indeed, if we define virtual reality as a consensual hallucination that is both immersive and interactive, then Sherlock Holmes may deserve the title of the first virtual reality character. Holmes' appearance in the 1890s inspired readers to come together and collectively imagine him as real, as well as participate in his adventures through collective efforts at textual exegesis. (Was Watson shot in the shoulder or the leg? Was his name James or John? etc.). While there had been earlier fictional characters who captured the imagination of the public –



Holmes has no counterpart in the real world, yet 221b Baker Street has become a place to visit for literary fans of Doyle's fictional universe to the extent that one now finds a Sherlock Holmes museum there. In retrospect, this is slightly ironic given that in terms of numbers, Baker Street only went up to no. 85 in Doyle's time. It was not until the third decade of the 20th century that Baker Street was extended so that it came to include address numbers that went all the way up to 221b. The case with Sherlock Holmes, however, is not unique. The need for anchoring fictional worlds in the actual world appears as a more prevalent phenomenon.

One may also travel to Lübeck to enter the Buddenbrook Haus, which was not only the home of the Mann family for a certain period of time, but also comprises the main scene of the story-world of Mann's *Buddenbrooks – Verfall einer Familie*. With regard to this site, there is a reciprocal effect between book and reality. The fact that the book draws extensively on Mann's personal experiences, already at its publication in 1901 (and especially so at the publication of the second one-volume edition of the subsequent year), made it a treasure for people who wanted to establish direct links between the recounted world of the book and the actual world of Lübeck and its citizens from 1835 to 1877, which is the time span of the story-world. The claimed closeness between fictional and factual world led a majority of citizens of Lübeck to disapprove of Mann's work on the basis that he had exposed them to public derision.

Yet, as *Buddenbrooks* gained increasing popularity, Lübeck in general and Mengstraße no. 4 in particular became sites of pilgrimage for people cherishing Mann's work. During the Nazi regime, the Nazis found themselves forced to rename the building Wullenweber-Haus in order to diminish the memory of Thomas Mann. Since 1991, but already prefigured from the mid-1970s, when a memorial room for Thomas Mann was erected, the house has constituted a museum for Heinrich and Thomas Mann. In the minds of most people, the Buddenbrook Haus in Mann's novel is conflated with the actual Mengstraße no. 4, despite the fact that only the façade of the original house survived the Allied bombing in 1942. This carries far more weight in terms of the argument than the fact that the *Buddenbrooks* is a novel and by virtue of that a piece of fiction which cannot be taken directly to mirror actual reality. Yet, that is not how the majority of people perceive the relationship.

On 16 June every year a number of literary devotees travel to Dublin to take part in the literary restaging of Leopold Bloom's walk through Dublin, which in the recounted world of *Ulysses* took place on 16 June 1904. Ever since the mid-1920s, enthusiast readers of *Ulysses* have felt the need to embody Bloom's walk through the city by restaging central parts of it. In terms of literary pilgrimage this is, of course, interesting compared to the previous examples, since it adds a temporal dimension to the spatial one. Fans of Joyce and *Ulysses* not only travel to Dublin to visit landmarks that feature in the recounted world of the novel; they also time their visit so that they may literally perform a Bloomsday walk in their own

---

Richardson's Pamela, Goethe's Werther, Dickens's (sic, AKP) Little Nell – Holmes was the first to inspire sober, scholarly biographies (with footnotes) as well as societies on both sides of the Atlantic dedicated to celebrating him as a 'real' person. The collective engagement with Holmes by members of the Baker Street Irregulars (USA) and the Sherlock Holmes Society (UK) probably made the texts come alive in a way that isn't possible through solitary reading. (Saler 2004, 145)

person. Once again, the interesting element is that Joyce nowhere in *Ulysses* insists on an amalgam between the recounted world and the world of the readers. The phenomenon of Bloomsday together with the two previous cases constitutes a whole array of examples which amply demonstrate how readers will not content themselves with the story-world of the text. They map it onto the actual world and, thereby, make a conflation between the two. At this point, some readers will likely object that there is still a marked difference between these cases from the world of fiction and that of religious literature proper. First, religious narratives include notions of super-natural agents which one neither finds in Sherlock Holmes, nor in *Buddenbrooks* or *Ulysses*. Second, religious narratives aim to inspire their audience to enactment in a manner that cannot be reduced to playfulness. I fully acknowledge these two counter-points and shall deal with them in due course.

What is at stake in these examples is the feature referred to in Peircean semiotics as the indexical sign. Whereas language is comprised of symbols referring to specific phenomena, so that the element referred to by the sign is conceived to be of a physical material nature and the signifier of immaterial character, this relationship is reversed in the indexical sign. The indexical sign is constituted by a relationship in which there is a direct, material connection between the signifier and the signified.<sup>11</sup> One of Peirce's examples is a weathercock turning in the wind. The weathervane is, by virtue of its physical movements, directly, physically related to the wind which its motion designates. The same pertains to symptoms of disease, such as a rash indexically referring to the measles of which it is a sign. My argument is that the propensity to project the story-world of fictional works onto the landscape to which they symbolically refer is an expression of the need to undergird the story-world with an indexical element that serves to stabilise and enhance the importance of the recounted world.

This feature – that a merger occurs between the world in which the readers are living and that of the text – is a primary trait of religious narratives and the related pilgrim cult as the land of Israel vividly testifies to. Scriptural stories have been projected onto the land in such a manner that churches, monasteries, and sacred places have been erected in accordance with the scriptural story-world. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is a patent example of this phenomenon. In the same way as in the previous examples from fictional narratives, the symbolic worlds of the texts have been grounded by being related to indexical signs of the landscape. Hereby, the story-world has attained a material form of reality. It has been provided with a material anchor. In a reciprocal process, religious narratives endow the landscape with meaning while their own credibility is in turn bolstered or stabilised by the materiality of the very landscape it refers to. In this manner, the landscape as a physical, material substantiation comes to serve as a demonstration that the symbolic worlds of the texts have a firm grounding.<sup>12</sup> Thereby, the texts cannot be

---

<sup>11</sup>The simplest definition Peirce provides of the index is that it is 'a sign which refers to the Object it denotes by being really affected by the Object' (Buchler 1955, 102).

<sup>12</sup>Essentially this is the theory upon which Roy Rappaport's masterpiece (Rappaport 1999) is founded. He argues that in most of the history of *Homo sapiens sapiens* religion has by virtue of its indexical properties (predominantly created in and by ritual), functioned to stabilise or bolster culture and, thereby, make it less vulnerable to annihilation. At a lower and more fundamental level, the same relationship is found to exist within religion between its symbolic and indexical components in such a manner

reduced to mere texts only. The landscape is included in order to document the asserted referentiality of the textual worlds – needless to say, I do not mean to suggest that this is done deliberately.

### The perceptivity to signs and agency

There is abundant evidence from cognitive science that human beings are evolutionarily prone to search for intentionality and, thereby, agency also in contexts in which intentionality may not necessarily be warranted. This element of hypersensitivity to agency can be explained on the basis of our hominin evolutionary background. The predecessors of current *Homo sapiens sapiens* left the arboreal areas and entered the savannah. Approximately four to three and a half million years ago they obtained bipedal locomotion and, thereby, also – due to the opening of the vocal tract as a result of walking on two legs with consequent anatomical changes in the mouth and throat regions – increased abilities for speech (Mithen 1998, 233–238). Due to the transition in habitation, they were exposed to a multitude of dangers from various predators. In such an environment, our hominin predecessors are likely to have evolved an extreme perceptivity to search for agency, the so-called HADD (hypersensitive agency detection device).<sup>13</sup> Avoidance of potential predators as well as detection of prey would have been a crucial prerequisite in order for hominin and related species to prolong their lifespans. If one were not continuously alert to all types of signs in the environment one could easily succumb to the dangers of the savannah. Early hominins would experience situations, as we also do, as in cases when a branch falls off a tree or the wind causes noise by blowing in the foliage. In such situations they would not be able to make direct inferences from the detected signs to any apparent referent. From a certain point, the exact time of which we do not know, hominins exposed to such situations are likely to have invented notions about super-human agents responsible for the transmission of those signs which could otherwise not be assigned to any obvious source. If a sign cannot be adduced to something in the proximate environment, it must originate, so the logic, with an invisible agent. Now this, of course, hardly implies religion in the strong sense of the term<sup>14</sup>, but

---

that the latter undergird the former. In a Christian service, for instance, it is the ritual elements that stabilise the sermon and not the other way around. The declaration of the Lord's supper that one has received forgiveness for one's sins is stabilised and, thereby, provided with a seemingly real nature by being undergirded by the physical act of eating a biscuit and drinking some wine. At the lowest and most basic level, the same relation may be found to exist within ritual itself between symbolic and indexical elements in the strict Peircean sense of the categories. Rappaport first developed this theory of ritual, religion, and culture in a series of essays published in 1979 (Rappaport 1979). Since I began reading Rappaport in the mid-nineties, he has exerted a strong influence on my thinking about these issues as is also evident from the argument of this essay and my forthcoming 2017 essay (Petersen, forthcoming).

<sup>13</sup>There exists copious evidence in cognitive science and neuropsychology of humans' evolutionarily founded tendency to be excessively alert of signs appearing in the environment. For the tendency among humans to attribute agency and, thereby, anthropomorphosise the perceived signs, see, in particular, Guthrie (1993, 89f.); for the importance of the HADD, see Barrett (2000, 2004, 31–34; as well as Boyer 2001, 144–148); and with respect to the evolutionary background, see in particular, Donald (1991, 95–123), and Turner and Maryanski (2009, 124–128, 146–150) as well as Turner et al. (2017).

<sup>14</sup>Cf. the definition developed by Jensen with which I fully concur. He defines religion as: 'Semantic and cognitive networks comprising ideas, behaviours and institutions in relation to counter-intuitive super-human agents, objects and posits' (Jensen 2014, 8).

it does explain an important feature about religion which, according to some cognitive scholars, constitutes an important element in the evolutionary background for the later emergence of religion. Much of this discussion, though, hinges on what exactly is meant by religion, and how we should conceive of the HADD to foster, from a certain point in human evolution, notions of superhuman agents of a more stable nature.<sup>15</sup> We do not need to enter into this debate here, but our hyper-sensitivity to not only search for signs but also for intentional agents behind the signs transmitted may help us to understand what is at stake, when fictional texts are ascribed the role of mirroring the transhuman world (cf. Deacon 1997, 435f.). However, we need to take another feature into consideration as well: the propensity of humans to conceptualise their world narratively.

There is much evidence supporting the claim that we humans organise our world and structure our experiences by thinking narratively, or, to be more precise, that our thinking is, in fact, narratively organised (see many of the essays in Geertz and Jensen 2011). This is also the reason why narrative is not confined to the mode of narrative texts only. We often find discursive texts which have recourse to narrative in order to, for example, legitimise the exchanges that take place at the discursive level between a first person (singular or plural) addressing him- or herself to a second person (singular or plural) recipient. Similarly, it has been contended that even scholarly arguments follow the basic pattern of any narrative. Not only do they follow the internal organisation of a narrative as defined by Aristotle (1982, *The Poetics* 7.1–7): a beginning (*archē*), a middle (*meson*), and an end (*teleutē*), together constituting a whole (*holon*), but they also seem closely to follow the elaborated narrative programme developed in Greimasian semiotics and consisting of: (1) qualification; (2) realisation; and (3) sanction.<sup>16</sup>

The ubiquity of narrative thinking among humans has been captured succinctly by Eco. In *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*, he places emphasis on the capacity of humans to narratively organise their lives and make sense of their experiences. He accentuates this element as indispensable in all reading:

And so it is easy to understand why fiction fascinates us so. It offers us the opportunity to employ limitlessly our faculties for perceiving the world and reconstructing the past. Fiction has the same function that games have. In playing, children learn to live, because they simulate situations in which they may find themselves as adults. And it is through fiction that we adults train our ability to structure our past and present experience. But if narrative activity is so closely linked to our everyday life, couldn't it be that we interpret life as fiction, and that in interpreting reality we introduce fictional elements? (Eco 1994, 131)<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup>For this discussion, see Boyer (2001, 148–167). As to the discussion of the appearance of more complex forms of religion, see Turner and Maryanski (2009, 146–150).

<sup>16</sup>Greimas and Courtés (1993); Greimas (1970, 157–183). Similar reflections are found in Bremond (1966, 60f., 1973, 309), in which he distinguishes between three phases of the narrative process consisting of: a phase of potentiality (*éventualité*), a phase of action (*passage à l'acte*), and a phase of fulfilment (*achèvement*). Contrary to Greimas, who developed a theory of narrativity, Bremond focuses on narrative texts specifically.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. Eco's corresponding statement that:

At any rate we will not stop reading fictional stories, because it is in them that we seek a formula to give meaning to our existence. Throughout our lives, after all, we look for a story of our origins, to tell us why we were born and why we have lived. Sometimes we look for a cosmic story, the story of the universe, or for our own personal story (which we

Eco's point applies to religious narrative as much as to fictional literature. Both are representative of an abundance of signs that calls for interpretation by the *homo semioticus* who by virtue of his or her evolutionary background is predisposed to seek the meaning of the signs. If the reading of narrative, as Eco contends, already at the outset has much to do with readers who use it as a means of self-reflection in the sense that they mirror their lives in the recounted story-world and have it function as a source of inspiration for how they should act in the world, the tendency to enhance the significance of the narrative by indexically projecting it onto the world should not come as a surprise. It is a way of not only ascribing importance to particular narratives but also a manner of bestowing them with a greater degree of reality. They are not only signs floating in the air but they are also anchored in the actual world.

### **It takes counter-intuitive agents for a narrative to be attributed religious status**

So let us briefly recapitulate some insights from section four, before we resume the discussion of counter-intuitiveness and the importance of p-s-t-coordinates for religious narrative. In terms of content I do not think that fictional and religious narrative differs much from each other. The similarity between the two categories is evidenced by the fact that narratives such as the Gospels that are traditionally viewed as religious narratives can be read as fictional literature, whereas fictional narratives, in a similar way, can be conceived of as religious discourse as in the case of fiction-based religion. We have also observed a number of borderline cases in which fictional literature is mapped onto the world in such a manner that it resembles religious pilgrimage. Yet content matters<sup>18</sup>, but it is important to recognise that the question eludes the fiction-religion divide. It is not any piece of fiction that is likely to be attributed a religious character, nor is every fictional narrative a possible candidate for being indexically projected onto an actual landscape.

The kind of narrative that is likely to be mapped onto a particular territory is the one which by means of its p-s-t-coordinates (that is, the inventory of persons, space, and time) of the story-world may be recognised by readers as having a bearing on the actual world. Readers are likely to underestimate the literary nature of the narrative in question by conceiving of it as a direct reflection of their own world as the examples from Doyle, Mann and Joyce vividly illustrate. By adding elements recognisable to readers from their own world into a fictional narrative, authors may create the illusory effect among their audience that the story-world is, in fact, a direct mirroring of the actual world, that is, that narrate and narration are identical with each other.<sup>19</sup> It is the same effect which makes it difficult for scholars studying the gospel literature to emphasise the difference between the recounted and the historical Jesus, since a majority of people – based on the p-s-t-coordinates of the

---

tell our confessor or our analyst, or which we write in the pages of a diary). Sometimes our personal story coincides with the story of the universe. (1994, 139)

<sup>18</sup>With respect to the question of the qualities that enable a fictional narrative to be ascribed religious character, Markus Davidsen has introduced the useful concept of affordance in order to theorise on the properties that make fictional narratives usable as religious texts. See Davidsen (2014, 96–104).

<sup>19</sup>By narrate I refer specifically to the narrative utterance or the enunciate of the narrative. For the distinction between narrate and narrative, see Davidsen (1993, 107–117, 360–363) whom I am also on this point much indebted to,



narratives as well as the traditions which they have given rise to – are likely to conflate the two with each other.

In terms of religious narrative, sacred sites and buildings are often closely connected to myths that contain such p-s-t-coordinates which link them with a location invested with sacredness. Sometimes the texts, as we know from the early Christian gospel literature, predate the sacred places which subsequently are erected as a reaction to the religious narratives which give references to the specific locations. At other times the relationship is reversed so that the honouring of a sacred site prompts the subsequent creation of narratives which account for the sacredness attributed to the site (as in aetiological myths). Once again, we may notice a reciprocal relationship between the two in which the textual map gains credibility by being projected onto a particular territory and the territory is imbued with meaning on the basis of text that tells the story about it. This indexical component is very important for religious narratives in order to persist as texts reckoned as religious by interpretative communities. Yet, as a criterion it is hardly sufficient, since it begs the question what it ultimately is that enables any narrative to be ascribed religious character. If it were just the quality of being capable of being projected onto an actual territory it would be difficult to explain why texts such as *Buddenbrooks* or *Ulysses* have not been attributed a religious nature. In other words, there must be more at play than the indexical aspect which some texts, both religious and fictional, are ascribed.<sup>20</sup>

We have seen that for a narrative to be assigned religious status, it must include p-s-t-coordinates that allow the text to be seen as referring to the actual world of the reader. Now I want to highlight as a second point that for narratives to be attributed religious character, they must also contain a story-world in which persons are featuring or powers are invoked that are ascribed counter-intuitive properties (cf. footnote no. three). But as we well know, not least from the genres of fairy tales and science fiction, this is not exclusive to religious narratives. Therefore, agents in possession of counter-intuitive qualities will not suffice as a criterion either. The qualities in question have to be of such a nature that the counter-intuitive agents by the recounted characters can be thought of as intervening benevolently or, possibly, even malignantly in the world. The fact that a person is seen to be able to walk on water or fly in the air does not make him or her religiously salient. Religious saliency is only at play in as much as the agent is able to use this extraordinary power for the benefit or harm of the other recounted figures of the story-world- and, thereby, in the world of the readers.

If, however, a person or a power is described as possessing certain counter-intuitive abilities that may be used with regard to other figures within the narrated world, the difference between these figures may in the world of the readers be projected onto a similar difference in the context of religious semantic universes. Thereby, readers may associate or mirror themselves in those recounted figures which in the story-world are depicted as victims or beneficiaries of the actions of the super-human agents. Similarly, the figures of the recounted story who are ascribed salient counter-intuitive features may be transposed to such an extent

---

<sup>20</sup>*Star Wars* is presumably also an exception in this regard, since it does not contain any indexical link to the actual world that would allow for pilgrimage. Yet, the lack of the conflation between narration and narrate may be remedied by the presence of a strong, salient culturally postulated superhuman agent (the Force) which in certain cases allows the text to be ascribed religious significance.

that they are thought to perform similar actions in the world of the readers. It is the existence of a contrast in the story-world between agents attributed salient counter-intuitive properties and figures who may serve as immediate identifiers for readers which enables readers to transfer this dualism into a religious framework in their own world. Since religion is constituted by a semantic universe that operates with at least a two-tiered world in which agents of the other world can intervene in the course of this world, it is understandable how works of fiction that instantiate a similar differentiation by virtue of transposition can be ascribed religious significance.<sup>21</sup> In particular, this observation applies to cases in which recounted figures of the story-world are understood to possess abilities that may be used beneficially by agents living in the 'ordinary' world of the recounted story; but we may nuance this feature even more. Boyer, in particular, has highlighted the importance of cognitive salience regarding religious representations. His insights are highly relevant with respect to understanding which texts constitute eligible candidates for being ascribed religious importance. By salience Boyer points to the significance of relevance for the remembrance and transmission of religious representations. He argues that:

What is 'important' to human beings, because of their evolutionary history, are the conditions of social interactions: who knows what, who is not aware of what, who did what with whom, when and what for. Imagining agents with information is an illustration of mental processes driven by relevance. Such agents are not really necessary to explain anything, but they are so much easier to represent and so much richer in possible inferences that they enjoy a great advantage in cultural transmission. (Boyer 2001, 167)

Much of Boyer's argument also applies to those forms of fictional narrative in which no persons in possession of counter-intuitive abilities appear. As readers we are drawn to literature in which the whole complex of social interaction features greatly, since we can use it to reflect our own lives and quandaries in. The gist of Boyer's argument with respect to religious narrative, however, is that those narratives that feature persons and powers with counter-intuitive abilities regarding social interaction are particularly salient. Thereby, we have not only come closer to an understanding of how religious narratives work but are also in a better position to explain which types of fictional narrative may be attributed religious significance. It is not any story-world in which persons and powers with counter-intuitive abilities appear that can be turned into the basis of religious world-views. Only fictional narratives which include figures that by virtue of their counter-intuitive powers may be held to possess strategic information about other figures in the story-world and, subsequently, are seen to act either on behalf of or against them, may potentially be overtaken by readers and used as religious narratives. This is not only obvious with respect to time-honoured religious narratives such as the early Christian gospel literature but also to those types of fiction that have come to form the basis of fiction-based religion.

---

<sup>21</sup>By saying this, I do not mean to suggest that the entire narrative world of a piece of fiction is taken over and turned into the foundation of a religious world-view. As with religious texts in general, different interpretative communities make selective take-overs. They will choose the elements they find meaningful and leave those aside which they consider contradictory or irrelevant to their views.



To this criterion we may add another point to which Boyer has also contributed substantially. There are certain domains which are likely to trigger religious representations, since they generate numerous inferences in a variety of mental systems and are, thereby, likely to become the object of cultural attention. People in general seem to subscribe to religious representations in four contexts in particular. They are: (1) matters pertaining to death and in particular the handling of the dead body and not so much as one might have expected as an expression of seeking comfort or as an abstract relationship with death *per se*, although both of these aspects may also be involved; (2) matters regarding to ritual and ritualisation; (3) matters with respect to questions of contingency, that is, issues such as ‘why did I lose my job?’, ‘why did my husband suddenly fall seriously ill?’, ‘why was my daughter killed in a traffic accident?’; (4) matters concerning moral questions (Boyer 2001, 169–202, 215–228, 253–263). In as much as these four domains are likely to trigger religious representations, it would be obvious to think that fictional narrative which in its story-world contains such representations are more likely to be ascribed religious significance in comparison with narratives void of references to these elements. Matters pertaining to these four domains feature largely in the religious literature of the main religions. However, as is also obvious from Boyer the four domains cannot be reduced to the main religions. They are a ubiquitous feature of religion in general.

### **From narrate to narration as a way of accounting for the move from fictional to religious narrative**

So far I have focused on the question of content as a way to account for the fact that narratives may be ascribed religious significance. I now turn my attention to the level of narration, that is, I move from the story-world, the narrate, to the way the story-world is conveyed. In previous work on this topic (cf. Petersen 2005 on this topic), I relied on an insight succinctly voiced by Ole Davidsen, namely that religious narratives are characterised by the fact that they will insist on a conflation between story-world and the world of the reader. In other words, a crucial difference between fictional and religious narratives ensues from the fact that religious narratives will claim to be more than pieces of fiction. They will arrogate to themselves the status that when compared to the actual world they exhibit an even more true account of it. Davidsen formulates this difference by asserting:

*... whereas fiction remains within its own world into which the reader has to transport himself, this particular literature [religious narrative, AKP], conversely, intrudes itself into the lifeworld of its reader. By virtue of transposition, fiction speaks about the world of the reader. It narrates a fictive world in which the reader may reflect his own world. The religious text does not speak about, but interferes into the world of its readers. (Davidsen 2005, 397f. – italics are maintained from Davidsen’s text which has been translated here from Danish into English)*

I think the point emphasised by Davidsen is highly pertinent to the discussion and that it does pertain to a number of religious narratives, but I am not sure whether the assertion holds true that religious narratives *per se* make a claim to overtrump the world of the readers. Surely, such a feature is found in some cases of, for instance, the early Christian gospel literature. The original version of the Gospel of John did not contain chapter 21, which serves to substantiate the credibility of