

New religions in cyberspace

Markus Davidsen studied comparative religion at Aarhus University (Århus, Denmark) 2001-2008. As part of his master studies he did an Erasmus exchange semester at Heidelberg University in Germany. He was attracted to Heidelberg because of a large interdisciplinary research programme on ritual, but it was his exposure to the new field of 'religion on the Internet' which set the course for his further academic career. Back in Århus he wrote his master thesis on Jediism, a new Internet-based religion inspired by the Star Wars movies, and since January 2009 he has been doing further research on Jediism and other fiction-based religions as a PhD candidate of Aarhus University, currently carrying out research at Leiden University, the Netherlands. He was awarded the Arenberg-Coimbra Group Prize for Erasmus students in 2009.

During the spring 2007 I visited Institut für Religionswissenschaft at the Ruprecht-Karls-Universität zu Heidelberg, Germany, as an international student under the Erasmus programme. I was intensely interested in rituals and had chosen Heidelberg because the university hosted the huge interdisciplinary *Sonderforschungsbereich Ritualdynamik*, bringing together researchers from not only my own discipline, comparative religion, but also from psychology, sociology, theology, philosophy, anthropology and so on. Even though I was only a student, I was invited to participate in any of the conferences or workshops that might interest me.

When I arrived in Heidelberg, I learned that the professors and PhD students at the Institute für Religionswissenschaft were not only interested in ritual in general. Their particular expertise was rituals taking place on the Internet: Christian prayers, Buddhist online temple worship, Pagan spirit work and so on. Their knowledge of religion on the Internet went beyond rituals. In fact they constituted Europe's leading centre for the brand new research field of Online Religion, a field that was entirely new to me and which nobody at my home institute knew anything about. Since 2005 the institute had published *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, the first and so far only academic journal dedicated solely to the study of online religiosity. Furthermore, three PhD students worked on projects within the research cluster *Zwischen Online-Religion und Religion-Online* which was a part of the *Ritualdynamik* research project. The three PhD students led the work group *White Rabbit (Arbeitskreis Weisse Haase)* on Online Religion where good master students were also invited to participate. I was invited to join.

Fairly quickly my interest in ritual gave way to an interest in the fascinating world of cyber religion. The new uses that conventional religious groups made of the Internet – from communication and information exchange to regular online rituals and services – immediately

fascinated me. But even more, I grew interested in the large multitude of new religious groups on the Internet and offered to make a presentation about a selection of them at a work group meeting.

My original idea was to present different types of new religious groups on the Internet and to sketchily develop a typology of them. In my view, the earliest research tended towards treating all new online religions as insincere *joke religions*. It is true that some groups belong to this category, (e.g. *The Church of MOO*) and that others belong to the related category of *religion parodies*, e.g. *The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster* which is a parody of the Intelligent Design movement. Some of the new online religious groups, however, take themselves deadly serious.

An important subcategory of the serious new online religions can be termed *fiction-based religions* insofar as they have grown out of a religion embedded in a work of fiction. This category includes online groups inspired by *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Matrix*, but the best example is the so-called *Jediism* which is inspired by the religion in the *Star Wars* movies. I didn't have enough time to study all these different groups thoroughly, so I started with the one I found most interesting, Jediism, and eventually my presentation came to be about Jediism only. The transformation of *Star Wars* into Jediism also became the subject of my thesis, and it is fair to say that I owe both my thesis subject and my fascination with the general field of Online Religion to my Erasmus stay in Heidelberg and my participation in the work group White Rabbit.

When I returned to Denmark, I got the chance to share my enthusiasm for Internet religions with my fellow students. Together with a recently graduated friend of mine, I gave a small elective course for bachelor students on *Religion and modern media* in the autumn of 2007. The course comprised two elements. The first, *Religion and Television*, was covered by my colleague Ruth Marbæk who had done her master thesis on that subject. The second, *Religion and Internet*, was done by me. It pleased me tremendously that, so soon after my return to Aarhus University, I was allowed to introduce fellow students to what I had learned in Heidelberg.

My Erasmus stay in Heidelberg did more than acquaint me with a new research field. Perhaps more importantly the international environment and inspiring personality of Prof. Gregor Ahn reignited my research zest and sparked a hunger for more international experiences. So after my thesis was written, I applied in the spring of 2008 for an international PhD scholarship at the Research Council in Denmark on a project entitled *Fictional Religions: The Morphology and Reception of Invented Religions embedded in Works of Fiction*.

I was lucky to be awarded the scholarship and started my research at Leiden University, the Netherlands, in January 2009. In the project I look at how certain religions embedded in fiction become transformed into genuine new fiction-based religions. My main case is still Jediism, but I also research groups inspired by the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, 'Pagans' inspired by Robert A.

Heinlein's science fiction classic *Stranger in a Strange land* and Chaos Magicians invoking the demonic gods of H.P. Lovecraft's horror short stories. These movements differ greatly. But they also share two features: Firstly they are based on works that the author and most readers consider plain fiction. Secondly members use the Internet as a tool to find each other, as a platform for communication and discussion and sometimes even as a medium for ritual and worship.

When I received the call a cold March morning that I had been awarded the Arenberg-Coimbra Group Prize for Erasmus Students I was surprised and deeply honoured. But more than that. Besides the feeling of honour of being selected out among many other applicants, I also experienced a deep sense of connection. The feeling which I had experienced for the first time in Heidelberg came back to me, a feeling of belonging to a border-crossing academic world and to a Europe of co-operation and sharing.

