Vera Cuntz-Leng

Religious Guilt and Fanfiction

Explorations of Queer Desires and Institutional Shame with the Good Omens Fandom

Abstract

Religious guilt and shame are prevalent topics discussed in fan writings. This article identifies tropes and motifs typical for fanfiction that deals with religious guilt, using one particular text from the Good Omens (Amazon Prime / BBC Two, US/UK 2019–2026) fandom as a case study: "That This Could Be the Kingdom" (2019) by seekwill. The aim of this paper is to highlight a strong link in fan works between queer identities and sexuality, on the one hand, and the Catholic Church (as an institution), on the other. By overcoming the contradictions between what the fictional characters have learned is right and what they actually feel, these fanfictions address sensitive issues of queer (auto-)biographies. They may send a hopeful and powerful message to queer individuals conflicted by their religious beliefs, underline the significance of choice / free will, and contribute to current perspectives on religion in popular culture.

Keywords

Fanfiction, Religious Guilt, Auto-biographic Writing, Queerness, Queer Sexuality, Coming-Out, Free Will, Good Omens (Amazon Prime / BBC Two, US/UK 2019–2026)

Biography

Dr. Vera Cuntz-Leng is a permanent research associate at the Institute for Media Studies at the Philipps-Universität Marburg. A founding editor-in-chief of the peer-reviewed fan studies journal *Fandom | Cultures | Research* (2024–), her academic work centers on fanfiction, *Harry Potter*, queer readings, and seriality. Her book *Harry Potter que(e)r. Eine Filmsaga im Spannungsfeld von Queer Reading, Slash-Fandom und Fantasyfilmgenre* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2015) won the Dissertation prize of the German Society for the Fantastic in the Arts.

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Introduction

As many fanfictions deal with the personal experiences of their writers and are sometimes in part auto-biographical, they frequently discuss sensitive topics like suicide, (sexual) abuse, child loss, gender inequality, or addiction. A search for fan works tagged with the term "religious guilt" on the multi-fandom fanfiction platform Archive of Our Own (AO3) generates, perhaps surprisingly, over 30,900 results.[1] Evidently, explorations of religious doctrine and belief systems as well as reflections upon the writer's religious upbringing are also on this list of popular sensitive fanfiction topics. A constantly growing queer community that is now associated with fanfiction writing (in contrast to earlier findings that the majority of fanfiction writers identified as heterosexual women) explains the presence of religious guilt as a topic, because it is intertwined with stories about coming-out, queer identities, and desires that conflict with Christian doctrine, Roman Catholicism in particular.

Religious guilt can be conceptualized as an internal spiritual struggle arising from a perception of having violated the moral code, rules, or standards of one's faith.[2] It is often associated with strong feelings of shame and self-condemnation and may be triggered by rigid, authoritarian settings that leave little room for questioning or doubt. In the case of queer experience, such feelings may stem from the Catholic Church's doctrinal silencing, exclusion, and erasure of homosexuality and of identities that fall outside the binary gender norm.[3]

Among the many recent TV shows with a strong fan following that deal with religion[4] – Supernatural (The WB / The CW, US 2005–2020), The Good Place (NBC, US 2016–2020), House of the Dragon (HBO, US 2022–present) are just a few examples – Good Omens (Amazon Prime / BBC Two, US/UK 2019–2026) stands out. This show is deeply invested in examining is-

1 As of 27 July 2026, a total 173,020 fan works had been tagged with the term "religion", 30,926 with the term "religious guilt", 7,807 with the term "religious conflict", and 6,622 with the term "catholic guilt".

2 Pargament/Murray-Swank/Magyar/Ano 2005.

3 Jordan 2000.

4 Here religion is conceptualized as a spiritual belief system in supernatural beings and an "unseen order" (James 1902, 53), as well as, more practically, a social phenomenon, as defined by Emile Durkheim: "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them" (Durkheim 1995, 44).

sues relating to free will and the capacity to find and explore a (queer) identity, and sets these concerns in stark contrast to Old Testament guidance. It therefore stands to reason that fans of the Good Omens TV show further explore these aspects in writings that engage with the heart of the original work. Here they discuss the seeming incompatibility of queer self-determination and faith, which leads to inner conflicts for characters in their story.

Following a brief discussion of the relations between fan culture, religion, queerness, and fanfiction writing – a cultural practice that is profoundly linked with the queerness and identity formation of its writers – this article offers a close reading of the rather popular Good Omens fanfiction "That This Could Be the Kingdom" (2019) by seekwill, locating fannish strategies deployed to elaborate on inner religious turmoil and queer desires.[5] As prosumers,[6] Good Omens fanfiction writers both consume the TV series and produce their own content. Hence, the analysis of fanfiction sheds as much light on the derivative work as it reflects back upon the original object of fandom. This qualitative study necessarily uses a mixed-methods approach,[7] which is informed by literary and film analysis alongside concepts derived from fan and reception studies. Its goals are to emphasize how, as Marie-Therese Mäder has written, "responses to religious references in the media can provide valuable insight into how religion is (re)constructed through media reception"[8] and to show how fanfiction can serve as a vehicle for discussion of the perceived incompatibility of religious doctrines and queer self-determination.

Write What You Love, Become What You Write

The writing of fictional texts that are derived from a explicitly declared source (object of fandom) is a widespread fan-cultural practice.[9] These texts

5 As of 27 July 2026, "That This Could Be the Kingdom" (2019) had received 24,418 hits, had been commented on 391 times, and had been liked by 2,172 individuals, while 727 fans had added a bookmark for the story on AO3. It has been translated into Chinese and is available as an audiobook on Apple podcasts.

6 Toffler 1980.

7 Mäder 2025, 58–59.

8 Mäder 2025, 56.

9 Many scholars have discussed the relations between the object of fandom, various fannish practices, and the texts that fans derive and create (Jenkins 1992; Bacon-Smith 1994; Pugh 2005; Jamison 2013; Busse 2017).

have in common that they follow what fan scholar Abigail Derecho has identified as an "archontic principle".[10] Derecho uses the term "archontic literature," in reference to Jacques Derrida, to describe fanfictions as literary works that seek to expand the never fully closed fictional universe (or archive) around a certain fan object. In doing so, Derecho offers a more neutral term than, for example, "textual poaching", proposed by Henry Jenkins in 1992, which can be read as questioning the legitimacy of fanfiction. These fan works are produced without commercial interests; they are published and shared within a community of other fans. Fanfiction writing, which began even before social media, has become a mainstream phenomenon in recent years, with large online platforms, archives, and gathering points.[11] Kristina Busse, one of the most influential and pioneering voices in the study of fanfiction, notes that "media fans have become more visible and multiple as fannish behavior has entered mainstream audiences".[12]

This development makes it harder to answer the question, who actually writes and reads fanfiction. During the early days of fanfiction – when texts were still published in fanzines and club magazines – fan scholars highlighted the subversive and feminist quality of the phenomenon and identified the majority of fanfiction writers as heterosexual women.[13] The homoerotic subgenre of slash fanfiction was embraced as a feminist counter-response to the construction of gender in mainstream media. Slash fanfiction focuses on romantic or sexual relationships between same-sex characters – usually men – taking its name from the solidus, or slash, symbol (/) used to link the characters' names. In her recent reflection on the phenomenon, Anne Kustritz emphasizes that slash "not only takes sexual variation as benign, but positively revels in these ecstasies".[14] Decades earlier, the feminist science-fiction writer Joanna Russ had euphorically called slash the "only sexual fantasy by women for women that's produced without the control or interposition of censorship by commercial booksellers or the interposition of political intent by writer or editors".[15] However, this assumption has changed over the past decades, as today fanfiction enthusiasts measurably

10 Derecho 2006, 64.
11 Busse 2017, 141.
12 Busse 2017, 181.
13 Russ 1985; Frazer Lamb/Veith 1986; Jenkins 1992; Bacon-Smith 1994.
14 Kustritz 2024, 163.
15 Russ 1985, 95.

more often identify as queer, in the broadest sense of the term.[16] In fact, a quantitative study of AO3 recently showed that 76 percent of platform users have a sexual orientation other than heterosexual and more than 40 percent identify as non-cisgender.[17]

Alongside this increase in queer-identifying fans over the years, we can recognize an increase in explicitly queer content or at least queer-coded content in mainstream media.[18] Moreover, we are seeing a strong interest in religious content in film and television productions – indeed, religious and (as in the case of Good Omens) biblical themes and references seem to be a guarantee of success.[19] When these three aspects are woven together – sustained interest in religious and biblical themes in popular culture, increasing sensibility for and visibility of queer themes in film and television, and a noticeable overlap between the LGBTQIA+ community and fan communities – the presence of "religious guilt" as a significant trope in fanfiction seems almost inevitable. As religion tends to address existential questions about the human condition, including questions about the meaning of life, identity, and gender, in doing so, religion can give rise to both open and very closed normative systems, which may stand in a stark conflict to the individual's experiences.

On many levels, fanfiction writing operates as a unique medium for autobiographical expression. Fanfiction writers explore their own experiences, desires, traumas, and social positions in a relatively safe environment. That safety results from the rather closed nature of the community of presumably like-minded fans, from the ability to establish personal but anonymous relationships with individual members (separation of fan identity and real-life persona), and from the fictionalized playground of the texts themselves.[20] Some fanfiction writers may, for example, choose to insert a new character into the beloved storyworld of their fan object as an extension of themselves

16 Halperin (1995, 62) explains, "Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. 'Queer' then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative."

17 Rouse/Stanfill 2023.

18 Cuntz-Leng 2026.

19 Tiemann 2022, 17–26.

20 Kustritz (2024) coined the term "pocket publics" to describe slash fanfiction communities as simultaneously protected and public spaces: while sufficiently accessible to be located, they are also sufficiently secure to insulate participants from harassment, censorship, and attention from the "outside" (e. g., workplace, family).

(e. g., "Mary Sue"[21]).[22] Others may use their fanfictions to explore their own sexuality and – in some cases – eventually to come-out as queer within an collaborative and supportive sandbox.[23] As the storyworld they write in is already well-established by the fan object, fanfiction authors can focus on the emotional and personal resonances of the characters' journeys. In doing so, they use their own authorial voice and are empowered.[24] In this sense, the act of writing fanfiction serves, among other functions, as a way of building a personal narrative and finding "authorship" over one's own life story.

Fans with a conservative religious upbringing who identify as queer (or are in the process of finding out who they are, what they feel, and whom they desire) may find that fanfiction that shows queer fictional characters experiencing feelings of shame and guilt resonates with their own experiences. The fandom becomes an explorative playground for their own creative expressions and a network of like-minded yet possibly anonymous individuals. The expressions of queer sexualities and the repercussions, including rejection by a (religious) community or family, are more personal and much more immediate in fanfiction than in queer-friendly TV programs or movies. In the former, the fandom can contribute and share their own feelings of fear, dislocation, and guilt, while in the latter they witness them rather passively.

Among the many popular media fandoms that currently deal with religious themes, the Amazon Prime adaptation of the 1990 fantasy novel *Good Omens. The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch*, by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman, is of particular interest for issues of religious guilt. The series evolves from a text heavy with queer undertones in the first season (a close adaptation of the original book) to a tragic queer love story in the second. Until recently, the ending was still open, but the concluding movie, which was highly anticipated by the fan community, aired (quite symbolically) on Ascension Day in 2026.

The narrative operates within a theological framework: an angel (Aziraphale) and a demon (Crowley) gradually become partners after first meeting while witnessing Adam and Eve's expulsion from Paradise, and they stick to-

21 The "Mary Sue" is an idealized fictional character who is portrayed as unrealistically perfect and over-competent, often serving as a vehicle for the fan author's wish fulfillment and often scorned in fan communities.

22 Pugh calls them "avatars of yourself". Pugh 2005, 87.

23 Pugh 2005, 116–142.

24 Pugh 2005, 193–217.

gether to prevent Heaven and Hell from bringing about the Apocalypse. The shift from queer readability (novel) to queer text (TV series) sets the stage for a variety of queer readings of the fan object in tension with religion, the Bible, and the Roman Catholic Church as an institution (represented by Heaven in the series). Interestingly, Good Omens borrows heavily from mythologies and iconography, with numerous references to the Hebrew Bible, Christian representations (enriched by allusions to Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, among others), hints at European religious history, and references to new religious movements. Good Omens' underlying philosophies and narrative style are also strongly influenced by Jewish thought.[25]

"That This Could Be the Kingdom"

Although the slash fanfiction "That This Could Be the Kingdom" by seekwill was published on AO3 in response to the first season of Good Omens TV series, which aired in 2019, it touches upon many aspects that were then explored by the second season, which aired in 2023. "That This Could Be the Kingdom" is a one-chapter story of just roughly 21,000 words. It is structured into twelve parts with subheadings. In the author's note, seekwill declares the fanfiction to be a gift to another AO3 user, Mussimm, that has been inspired by the prompt "confession". As a Human-AU[26] fanfiction, it departs from the fantastic narrative of Good Omens. It tells the story of the Catholic priest Father Aziraphale Fell, who is unexpectedly invited to participate in a public debate with Anthony Crowley, his former seminary roommate and long-lost friend. The narrative alternates between their tense present-day reunion and flashbacks to their time together as young men 26 years earlier, exploring their deep connection and their separation when Crowley chose to leave the priest seminar. As the two men reconnect in the present day, Aziraphale is forced to confront decades of suppressed pining and religious guilt regarding the life-altering choices he made about his vocation. Ultimately, the pair reconcile their past, leading

25 Aaron 2023; Goldfarb Styrt 2023; Naylor-Davis/Warren/Sheinfeld 2024; Doak-Keszler 2025.

26 In a Human-AU (Human Alternate Universe) the supernatural beings of the original work are transformed into mortal humans, which in this instance marks a significant alteration to the Good Omens canon.

Aziraphale to abandon the Church and find a sense of personal salvation in his romantic love for Crowley.

seekwill's story explores many themes that are typical for fanfictions dealing with religious guilt in the broadest sense and with the romantic pairing of Aziraphale and Crowley in particular. The story is preceded by a content warning: "this piece makes reference to real life conflicts, scandals, and crimes within the Catholic Church. They are not discussed in detail, but I wanted to flag it in case any reader wishes to avoid."[27] Thus, this example demonstrates through its paratext that it belongs to a certain tradition of fan culture, for the author is aware of the conventions of the community. The content warning recognizes that fan realms are understood as safe spaces. Moreover, it prepares the ground for the criticism of the Catholic Church found throughout the story. Although scandals that have roiled the Catholic Church are not discussed in detail, these institutional failings serve as the background for Crowley's scepticism and Aziraphale's internal conflict. During the public debate, Crowley argues against the Church's role in a "world on fire",[28] specifically criticizing religious institutions for fostering attitudes that lead to environmental collapse and the mass death of creatures. In addition, the narrative explores the lies and shame Aziraphale feels he was subjected to by the institution, which he later views with anger, describing his past as a time spent "flogging himself and steeping in shame".[29]

The narrative frames the core conflict between Crowley and Aziraphale as an incompatibility of religious belief and philosophy. Crowley is described as a "philosopher of free will and the human condition",[30] whereas Aziraphale serves as an obedient servant, in many ways Crowley's opposite, as a tool used and abused by the institution. Aziraphale secretly shares many of Crowley's ideals but is scared that if he abandons the Church (and allows himself to love Crowley), he will be abandoned in turn by God: "'The Church doesn't have a monopoly on God, Aziraphale.' Crowley speaks directly to Aziraphale's greatest fear. That without that building, the collar, that chain of command, that Aziraphale will go without."[31] The institutional Church is represented here by its architecture, regalia, and hierarchy, not by devotion

27 seekwill 2019, "Author's note".
28 seekwill 2019, "It is a ghost story".
29 seekwill 2019, "Tell you what to do".
30 seekwill 2019, "It is a ghost story".
31 seekwill 2019, "North Bank".

to God. Crowley's most important message to Aziraphale is that there is no promised land, no paradise waiting in Heaven for those who suffer and sacrifice – "to be alive itself is a reward."[32] When Aziraphale finally decides to leave the priesthood and chooses to end his suffering and self-denial in the name of God ("I have lived my whole life with a wrecked heart"[33]), he is in fact reconciled with God – "he comes to the realization that Crowley looks at him like he is a holy thing, and for the first time he feels like it might be true."[34] He finds God's love not only in Crowley but also in himself when he finally accepts who he is: "God is with him, he knows. Because God is love and how could this have been anything else?"[35]

Four tropes that can be found in fanfictions dealing with religious guilt are evident here: the transfer from the fantastic setting of the fan object to a more realistic setting (Priest AU in this case), the tension between institutionalized religion and free will, the shame and guilt forced upon believers by the institution, and the (brief) discussion of the Church's shortcomings and scandals in the real world, which adds a more realistic, political tone. Further, Aziraphale's desperate need for belonging, for companionship and family, which paralyzes him and thus prevents him from being capable of acting himself, is a staple of these texts and mirrors the fears of queer people surrounding possibly coming-out to their conservative religious families.

Another interesting element is the use of flashbacks as a narrative tool, for while they are a means to reflect upon past decisions and regrets, they also offer the characters in the present a second chance for happiness, an end to feelings of shame and guilt. Lastly, Aziraphale's exit strategy – leaving the priesthood – mirrors the well-known narrative of women who (attempt to) flee from abusive relationships or people who (try to) leave restrictive religious groups.

Aziraphale is only able to admit his romantic feelings for Crowley in the secluded secrecy of the confessional – it is an admission before God, unbeknownst to the Church. This key scene is a subversion of established conventions: it is not the apostate Crowley who asks for forgiveness for his sins; it is the priest who confesses. Crowley uses the language of confession to express his real grievance: not his lack of faith, but his "sin" of never being

32 seekwill 2019, "A world without us".
33 seekwill 2019, "Salve".
34 seekwill 2019, "Tell you what to do".
35 seekwill 2019, "Tell you what to do".

able to let go of Aziraphale. Crowley challenges Aziraphale's choice to stay in the priesthood, making it clear that their separation is his own form of penance for the time they lost. Much of Aziraphale's dialogue is internal or consists of hesitant, clipped responses. The subtext is his overwhelming religious guilt and his realization that his vocation has become a cage. Usually, the screen of the confessional is meant to hide the sinner's face, but instead it represents the emotional distance Aziraphale has tried to maintain – and which Crowley is now dismantling. However, Aziraphale is not yet able to leave. "'You will always have a place to go,' says Crowley, voice changed, a cautious optimism taking hold. 'If you leave.'"[36] He presents Aziraphale with the simple gift of a business card, an address, a promise of refuge. "Aziraphale could say that he has a choice to make. But this is no choice. There is one reality now. There is this card."[37] When Aziraphale finally takes the big step, it is this card that keeps him going, as might the contact address for a women's shelter or for a counseling center for victims of restrictive religious groups, strongly suggesting Aziraphale was being abused. Its physical presence constructs a reality that did not exist before: "But when he brings his fingers up to the pocket, rubs over the place the card is, where it stiffens the fabric, it is a totem. *You are here. You are alive. You are going to Crowley's.*"[38]

The subversion of the confessional scene – reimagining a ritual of judgment as a space for vulnerable, mutual admission – demonstrates how fan works can dismantle oppressive structures and traditional power dynamics. By framing Aziraphale's departure from the priesthood as escape from an abusive system, the narrative provides a totem of hope for those seeking to reconcile their own identities with their religious upbringings.

Concluding Thoughts

"That This Could Be the Kingdom" strongly divides religion as institutionalized Church from religion as belief system. If queer characters manage to exclude themselves from religion as institution, they become free to love as they wish and find God. "That This Could Be the Kingdom" serves as a poignant example of how fanfiction functions as a transformative medium

36 seekwill 2019, "Salve".
37 seekwill 2019, "Salve".
38 seekwill 2019, "Tell you what to do".

for processing the intersection of religious guilt and queer identity. By transposing Aziraphale and Crowley from a fantasy comedy into a more realistic Priest AU setting, the narrative exposes the friction between personal faith and the shame often perpetuated by the Catholic Church. The story's resolution suggests that religious fulfillment is found not in institutional obedience or self-denial but in the realization that "God is love", thereby allowing queer desire to be reclaimed as a form of holiness rather than a sin. Fanfiction contributes to normalizing the simultaneity and compatibility of queerness and religiosity in popular culture, and it is precisely through the explicit depiction of queer desires and sexuality that it breaks taboos that mainstream media still impose upon themselves.

The prevalence of religious guilt as a fanfiction trope reflects a need for stories that prioritize choice and free will over dogmatic suffering. These fannish narratives do more than just expand the storyworld of a beloved TV show. They offer a powerful tool for identity formation and personal empowerment. By separating institutional religion from a personal belief system, fan writers transform religious guilt from a debilitating cage into a vehicle for self-discovery and a path toward personal salvation found in human connection.

"That This Could Be the Kingdom" is paradigmatic for fanfiction's potential to serve as a grassroots catalyst for cultural change, reshaping ideologies or discourses by offering a backdoor for alternative perspectives to enter the mainstream. Within the realm of fan cultures, contemporary anxieties like religious guilt are explored (so too are heteronormativity, mental health, and climate change, among others) and sometimes actively dismantled. Such narrative interrogations can facilitate the individual fan's identity formation. In addition, on a broader cultural scale, reflections on religion in fan texts democratize and popularize complex theological concepts. By exploring everything – from the appearance of a priest and institutional rules to the boundaries between faith, philosophy, and dogma –fanfiction contributes to contemporary knowledge about religion. In doing so, it reproduces certain stereotypes but also points out inconvenient truths and transgresses social norms.

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