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Fandom and Religion

Editorial

Crowds in stadiums or public viewing areas cheer on their teams at the football World Cup. When film stars walk down the red carpet to attend award ceremonies, their fans scream. The autograph of a famous person on an everyday object massively increases that object's worth, including its financial value. And the success of international influencers is often measured by their accrual of fans, as ephemeral as they may be, and how many of their videos go viral.

The phenomenon of international and viral fandom can redirect attention away from various other forms of fandom, perhaps less visible, less viral, or less international, such as the fandom initiatives that emerge in local communities, growing out of and expressing a love and care for the local community and the local environment. One such example is composed of the many mystery crocheters and knitters in UK towns who adorn postboxes with postbox toppers (fig. 1). The website Let's Knit Together declares postbox toppers "a much-loved form of community art. From royal celebrations and Remembrance displays to cheerful seasonal scenes, these colourful creations brighten streets, spark conversations and showcase the creativity of local yarn bombers."[1]

From a fandom perspective, the postbox toppers not only bring together and visualize the many forms and variety of fandom, but also allow for academic interrogation of fandom, exploring, for example, how fandom becomes visible and how fandom might bleed into the social media world as well as into local communities.

The phenomenon of the often unknown and mysterious postbox-topper knitters provides a starting point for an exploration of the myths of fandom grounded in apparently mundane encounters and experiences. Myths have a narrative dimension. They are stories that elevate people, places or things.

1 An Ultimate Guide to Postbox Toppers 2026.

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Fig. 1: A postbox topper in Hull, 2026. Image by Alexander D. Ornella.

Myths lift the ordinary out of everyday life and link the ordinary to imaginations of transcendence such as supernatural, mysterious or inexplicable ideas. Myths also contribute to the narrative dimension of religion specifically.

The narrative exploration of transcendence – including through myths – lies at the heart of religion: religions are systems dedicated to exploring questions and ideas of transcendence, i. e. that which is perceived to go beyond the everyday and the ordinary. In doing so, religions develop forms of communication to shape and convey ideas of transcendence. As David Chidester puts it,

> religion is an arena of human activity marked by the concerns of the transcendent, the sacred, the ultimate – concerns that enable people to experiment with what it means to be human. Religious ways of being human engage the transcendent – that which rises above and beyond the ordinary. They engage the sacred – that which is set apart from the ordinary. And they engage the ultimate – that which defines the final, unavoidable limit of all our ordinary concerns.[2]

This experimenting "with what it means to be human" can happen within traditional religious communities or institutions as well as within culture and popular culture more broadly. Language and myths play a key role in such experimentation: "religious language" can take shape within religious traditions, where it might form ritual practices and mould identities. However, it can also be adopted into other cultural systems, such as popular culture. So when football fans elevate their teams or individual players above other teams and players, celebrating them ecstatically and purchasing collectibles and other fandom articles, when film fans decorate their homes with icon-like images of their idols or role models, when a concert becomes a ritual event, and when neighbours come together to express the love and care they have for their neighbourhood and community, these practices can be described as "religious" in the sense that they transcend the respective "object of worship" by elevating it above everyday life and turning it into something special or even supernatural. Or, in Chidester's words, "that which is set apart from the ordinary".[3]

The process of setting apart from the ordinary is exemplified by the postbox toppers and their fans. For example, in Hull, a city of 220,000 people in the north of England, every time a new postbox topper is spotted in the Newland Avenue area, it becomes the talk of the town. Residents will often take the new postbox toppers to social media, posting pictures proclaiming

2 Chidester 2005, 1.
3 Chidester 2005, 1.

that the "ladies of Newland Avenue" have done it again. Royal Mail, who are responsible for the postboxes, see the toppers as a way to bring cheer to the local community.[4] Sometimes, images of the artists and knitters are posted online, at other times they remain anonymous: "A mystery group of yarn bombers have been painstakingly creating crocheted 'bonnets' for post boxes", a local newspaper reports.[5]

Postbox toppers can help us understand the intricate ways "fandom" – and the meaning fandom practices create – is weaved into the everyday. In fact, postbox toppers can become practices of fandom themselves, as some knitters draw on popular culture, in particular the stories, characters and people whom they themselves are fans of, such as Winnie the Pooh. Many toppers express a passion for festivals and holidays, such as Christmas, or days of loss and sacrifice, such as Remembrance Day.[6] The (mysterious) knitters' material and visible expressions of their own passions and interests – the fandom they themselves inhabit – seems to resonate with onlookers and the local community. The BBC cites a fan: "[People] were commenting on how they had them smile and people connected to them."[7] On Facebook, the UK Post Box Toppers and More Group is a community for the knitters and their fanbase. Postbox toppers thus adopt a religious dimension: the elevating of people, things and spaces out of the ordinary, the setting apart of people, things and spaces from the ordinary.

Fandom practices are, ultimately, also connected to economic practices as part of a multibillion fandom industry.[8] For example, companies have started to utilize the postbox toppers to address fans themselves. Netflix promoted its film The Thursday Murder Club (Chris Columbus, US/UK 2025) through postbox toppers that popped up in London and various other parts of the United Kingdom.[9]

What can we take away from this short discussion of postbox toppers?

First, fandom includes a mix of the known and the unknown, the knowable and the unknowable, the mundane and the mysterious. Fandom lies somewhere between the everyday and the extraordinary. The "object of worship"

4 Morgan 2021.
5 Morgan 2021.
6 See images on Facebook posted by members of UK Post Box Toppers and More Group, https://t1p.de/1nai8 [accessed 30 July 2026].
7 Phipps 2022.
8 Fiske 1992.
9 LBB Editorial 2025.

is explicitly set apart from everyday life; it is transcended, yet at the same time stays part of everyday life. The football star is still a human being; the postbox toppers are part of a daily commute to work. In his article in this issue, "A Virtual Fanfiction Universe", William Bainbridge highlights this liminality of fandom. Analysing The Secret World / Secret World Legends (Funcom, NO 2012–present), a network of computer simulations designed by and for fans of the horror author H. P. Lovecraft, he reflects on how the world of Lovecraft is transformed into a virtual fandom universe, which role religion plays in it and what it means to delve into it as a researcher and participant.

Second, religious symbols are used in different media to convey transcendence. In his contribution "The Ocular Gaze in Shōnen Anime", Mark Moyano illustrates this particularly well using the example of the eye symbol in three Japanese anime: Bleach: Thousand-Year Blood War (JP 2022–present), Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba (JP 2019–2024), and Naruto Shippuden (JP 2007–2017). The eye alludes to divine power, but it is also frequently incorporated into merchandise and fan art associated with these anime. Moyano demonstrates that complex processes of reception exist between religions, the anime, the merchandise and fan practices such as online discussions and fan art.

Third, fandom is not just narrative and imagination, for the imagination is poured into media and material practice. Altars are set up at home for music stars, posters of film actors are hung above beds, sports stars' autographs are collected (and sold for high prices), and stories are woven around the tangible postbox toppers. All of these examples are based on material things and media representations connected to practices and imaginations. Akif Tahiiev explores such representations in his article "The Cinematic Face of the Sacred in Contemporary Shiʿi Visual Culture on Instagram". He analyses how contemporary Shiʿi social media culture uses the faces of stars who play religious figures in films to convey religious messages. In the process, the actors merge with the religious figure they portray, and religious visual culture blends with online fan culture.

Fourth, fandom is political. It is about what is appropriate or offensive: fandom can reinforce social systems and expectations, or fandom can be subversive and challenge established norms and values. Film stars can become heads of states or countries (Jayaram Jayalalithaa and Ronald Reagan, for example), but fans can also bring down famous stars (e. g. the US-American film star Blake Lively). In her article "Religious Guilt and Fanfiction", Vera Cuntz-Leng focusses on the socially critical – or, in this case, religiously

critical – aspect of fandom. She analyses one particular fan fiction related to Good Omens (US/UK 2019–2026), which is based on the fantasy novel of the same name by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman. She demonstrates how this fan writing blends queer themes with religious ones, thereby addressing issues that can find their way into different audiences.

The postbox toppers certainly occupy public space. But as these articles in this issue make evident, public space is occupied not just offline but increasingly online as well. Thus, social media and other online platforms can make a dynamic contribution to shaping public opinion about religion and to reinforcing religious representations. As all these articles show, fandom is also about negotiating the use of public space.

Alongside the articles on the topic of fandom and religion, three articles in the open section round off this issue:

In "Make Yoga, Not War", Lukas Bartl highlights the role yoga played in the GDR as a health recommendation. These practices could be small individual rituals that promoted ideas about the healthy body and formed a sort of "risk community" in the context of the threat of nuclear annihilation. In "The Individual as Cosmos", Eli Yazbeck uses the concept of "sacred humanism" to analyse how the film The Life of Chuck (Mike Flanagan, US 2025), based on Stephen King's novella of the same name, links individual destiny with the end of the universe. And in "The 'Offer of Life', Military Saints and the Relationship Between Religious and Civil Institutions", Paolo Bertetti and Jenny Ponzo examine the portrayal in films and TV series of two men who are currently candidates for canonisation on account of having sacrificed their lives, noting, in particular, representations of the boundaries between state and religion.

These articles in the open section all consider how media form norms and identity, two concepts that are also helpful for understanding fandom, media and religion. Fandom is strongly connected to processes of identity formation and confirmation. It is also a normative system that formulates its own rules and regulations and determines what's in and what's out. Fans set trends, follow trends and amplify trends. Fans determine – to some extent – where money and resources are being directed, yet at the same time they are themselves directed and redirected by financial interests and available resources.

So, grab your digital JRFM, dive into the rich discussions, join the JRFM fanbase, and become part of the new wave of media and religion scholarship!

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Filmography

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