



Universiteit  
Leiden

## Religious Narratives as Plausibility Structures

### Applicants

Supervisor Name	Institute
Dr. Markus Altena Davidsen	LUCSoR
Dr. Kim Beerden	History

### Project description

Religions involve belief in the unbelievable: in evil spirits causing disease, in souls surviving death, and in gods punishing wrongdoers and blessing the just. Cognitive studies suggest that humans are predisposed to speculate about fate and divine agency, but support from so-called ‘plausibility structures’ is needed for spontaneous religious cognition to develop into firmly held beliefs about particular deities. Examples of plausibility structures for religious belief include religious narratives, in which gods and spirits are presented as real characters, and religious rituals, in which gods and spirits are addressed as if they were actually present.

This project investigates the role of religious narratives as plausibility structures for religion. More concretely, it aims to test and develop a theory on the persuasive power of religious narratives developed by Markus Altena Davidsen [“The Religious Affordance of Fiction: A Semiotic Approach”, *Religion* 46(4), 521–549, 2016]. Based on analyses of the Christian Gospels and contemporary fiction-based religions (*Star Wars*-based Jediism and Tolkien spirituality), Davidsen suggests that a given narrative can work as a plausibility structure for religion if it includes the following textual features: (1) narrative religion, i.e. characters performing rituals directed at supernatural beings that can be taken as models by the reader, and (2) veracity mechanisms, i.e. rhetorical features that explicitly claims or implicitly implies that the text is non-fictional truth.

To test the theory, this project investigates the persuasive power of narratives in two additional cases: the Apollonian cult at Delphi and the International Raëlian Movement (a contemporary UFO religion). The project will analyse the role that narratives play as plausibility structures within these two traditions and identify the rhetorical features that these narratives use to generate their authoritative status. The findings will be compared to hypotheses generated by the theory, and used to refine the theory where necessary.

### Research Trainee Profile

This project will employ two research trainees. Students enrolled in the following programmes will be eligible to apply: MA Theology and Religious Studies, MA/ResMA History, and MA/ResMA Classics and Ancient Civilizations.

Research Trainee 1 (Apollo at Delphi) will be required to have a good knowledge of ancient Greek religion and willingness to master the theoretical framework in question. Prior knowledge of narratology is preferred, but no prerequisite.

Research Trainee 2 (International Raëlian Movement) will be required to have a good knowledge of new religious movements and willingness to master the theoretical framework in question. Prior knowledge of narratology and anthropology of religion is preferred, but no prerequisites.

The research trainees will have the following tasks (under supervision):

- 1) To reconstruct the religious ritual practice (i.e. communication with postulated superhuman beings) of the tradition in question.
- 2) To identify the corpus of narratives (mythical, literary, biographical) of the tradition which revolve around those supernatural beings on which the ritual practice is focused.
- 3) To reconstruct the role played by the narrative corpus as a plausibility structure for the ritual practice within the tradition in question. This includes asking questions about the use of the narratives: For example, are the narratives used directly in ritual? Are the narratives rehearsed in social and educational settings? It also includes asking questions about the relative importance of the narrative corpus as a plausibility structures vis-à-vis other plausibility structures. For example: Do other non-narrative texts, or certain social institutions, constitute more important plausibility structures than the narrative corpus? Do different types of narratives appeal to different groups of adherents?
- 4) To analyse the veracity mechanisms used by the narratives within the corpus to construct their own authority and plausibility.

### **Collaboration**

LUCSoR is a research centre with the ambition of initiating research initiatives on religion that go beyond the expertise of the core staff. For example, per November 2016, LUCSoR launches a series of annual conferences. Also the present proposal for research collaboration with Ancient History should be seen in this light.

We hope that this small research project will be a catalyst for another area of cooperation: regular research meetings with a faculty-broad network of scholars of religion. We envision this network as a meeting place for scholars who are interested in how theories from the study of religion can be used in their own work and in how their work on religion can help advance theories about religion in general. Outside LUCSoR, one of the largest groups of scholars who would benefit from such a network are located at the department for Ancient History. This department has three staff members (Jürgen Zangenberg, Frits Naerebout, and Kim Beerden) who all specialise in religion *and* share with the LUCSoR staff the interest in applying and developing general theories on religion. At a later stage we hope to attract scholars from other institutes within the faculty as well, but it makes sense to begin with Ancient History.

We see this small research project as a way to facilitate the development of a research network, as the research network will provide a platform for us to present and discuss the findings of the project. We hope that more ideas for joined research projects and grant proposals will arise from this increased contact between scholars of religion in LUCSoR and Ancient History.

## Deliverables

**Presentations.** Each research trainee will present his/her research in Leiden, at a meeting of the new research network, and at a suitable conference in the Netherlands (such as the annual conference of the Dutch Association for the Study of Religion or the annual LUCSoR conference).

**Academic article.** In addition, the results of the two case studies and their implications for the tested theory will be presented in an academic article which will be submitted to the journal *Numen*. Markus Altena Davidsen will write up the article with the two research trainees who will be credited as co-authors.

## Planning

### Research trainees (during employment period)

1 January 2017 Project starts

Jan-Mar 2017 Identification of narrative corpora, reconstruction of ritual practice

Apr-Jun 2017 Analysis of the veracity mechanisms in the narrative corpus  
Reconstruction of the role of the narrative corpus as plausibility structure  
Presentation in religion research network

Aug 2017 Deliver written rapport to supervisors  
Help work on first draw of *Numen* article

31 Aug 2017 Employment period ends

### Research trainees (after employment period)

Oct/Nov 2017 Presentation at conference of the Dutch Association for the Study of Religion (Oct) or the LUCSoR conference (Nov)

### Supervisors

2017-2018 Write up research article based on findings (as far as possible in collaboration with research trainees)

## Student Application

The research trainees will be employed for the period 1 January to 31 August 2017. They will be employed for 0,2 fte during the months January through July and for 0,4 fte during August. This equals a 12 month employment of 0,15 fte.

Application deadline: 28 November 2016.

Applications should be sent to Markus Altena Davidsen ([m.davidsen@hum.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:m.davidsen@hum.leidenuniv.nl)).

Students who apply should include:

- (a) a resume (to demonstrate their academic credentials),
- (b) a motivation letter (in which students are encouraged to elaborate not only on why they are the right ones for the job, but also to reflect on what they hope to gain/learn from the project),
- (c) and a two page research note (in which students present some initial ideas about how to approach the task at hand).