



## The Religious Functions of Pokemon

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**Abstract:** Relying on the definition of religion offered by C. Geertz, this paper examines the nature and success of the Pokemon franchise in terms of its functions as a secular religion. The author finds that the main contribution of the Pokemon universe is the presentation of monsters in a demythologized, friendly fashion that allows children to gain self-confidence through their control of fictional supernatural beings.

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*“I will travel across the land,  
Searching far and wide  
Each Pokemon to understand  
The power that’s inside.  
Gotta catch ‘em all!”*

[1] So intones the theme song of the inordinately popular children’s television series *Pokemon*. The rhyme expresses the core of the Pokemon phenomenon, a multi-media children’s craze which swept the globe at the end of the 1990s. Pokemon, short for “pocket monsters,” is an imaginary kingdom of monsters which, like the kingdom Animalia, encompasses its own phyla, orders, and species. The undeniable social force generated by the now-defunct Pokemon furor follows the modern trend of casting monsters in socially useful roles. Modernity, on the whole, has little use for monsters that do not earn their keep: the Muppets are entertainers, for example, while the monsters of Sesame Street act as teachers. Pokemon, however, are unique; teaching and entertaining

aside, their most significant social function lies in their ability to serve as a secular religion.

[2] A description of the Pokemon universe and a brief history of the development of the Pokemon phenomenon itself will serve to illuminate some of its more religious qualities. Pokemon came into being in Japan in 1996 (Pok Case Study 1). The concept is based upon the existence of a parallel world in which humans and Pokemon coexist peacefully, despite the fact that humans practice the hunting and capture of “wild” Pokemon. The domesticated Pokemon are subsequently confined to “pokeballs” and trained to participate in gladiator-style battles with other Pokemon. As they gain battle experience, they evolve into more advanced versions of their base forms. At the age of eleven, children may embark upon “Pokemon journeys” in an attempt to become “Pokemon masters” by capturing every possible species of Pokemon and defeating the world’s most elite Pokemon trainers (Pok Trainer’s Guide). This is the goal of Ash Ketchum, the 11 year-old protagonist of the Pokemon universe, aided by his friends, Brock and Misty, and by his favorite Pokemon, Pikachu. His noted rivals are Gary, the picture of conceit, and the insidious Team Rocket, a sneering and dishonest boy-girl duo named Jesse and James. When these characters are involved, the Pokemon battles undertake a symbolic representation of the struggle of good against evil.

[3] Despite this engaging premise, Pokemon’s thorough saturation of American youth culture and ultimate transformation into a secular religion resulted mainly from the aggressive marketing strategies behind the campaign. Pokemon originated in Japan as a game for the Nintendo Game Boy console in 1996 (Pok Case Study 1). The game’s

designer, Satoshi Tajiri, drew inspiration from his childhood hobby of collecting insects in jars and visualizing their behavior in combat (Pok Case Study 2). To supplement the popularity of the game, Nintendo arranged for the publication of a serialized Pokemon comic in the widely-read children's magazine *Koro-Koro Comics* (Pok Case Study 2). In light of the moderate success of the Pokemon comic, a television series adapted from the strip aired in April of 1997 (Pok Case Study 2). Its instant success sparked the decision to introduce Pokemon into American culture (Pok Case Study 7).

[4] Many cultural adaptations had to be made. The name of the series itself was altered, as American licensure companies felt that the Japanese title of "Pocket Monsters" was too suggestive for the sensibilities of America children (Pok Case Study 5). It was decided that the unofficial Japanese abbreviation "Pokemon" would serve as the official title for the American version (Pok Case Study 5). In addition, the Pokemon themselves were anglicized. Pokemon #7, for example, named "Squirtle" in English, was originally called "Zenigame" in Japanese (Pok Case Study 5). Pikachu, who became the mascot of the entire movement, was the exception. Surveys of *Koro-Koro Comic* readers indicated that despite its relatively weak status in the game, Pikachu was the most popular Pokemon, and therefore the most marketable (Why Pok Success). It was considered desirable for Pikachu to have a memorable name. To ensure this, its language skills are limited to constant repetition of the terms "Pika" and "chu", making the name difficult for children to forget (Why Pok Success). Pikachu became the poster child (or poster monster) for the campaign, and its uniquely Japanese name made it more memorable to American audiences.

[5] After these and other adaptations were made, the American version of the television series aired in September of 1998 (Pok Case Study 10). By December of that year, enthusiasm for all things Pokemon began to manifest in the U.S. The Pokemon Game Boy cartridges were released in time for the holidays, and rapidly became the highest-selling Game Boy game ever (Pok Case Study 13). Nintendo reported sales in the millions. By the spring of 1999, Pokemon was the most watched television show in the 6-12 year old demographic (Pok Case Study 13). Meanwhile, Hasbro, the company in possession of the licensing rights to Pokemon, could not produce enough plush toys and other merchandise to keep up with demand (Pok Case Study 13). In the spring of 1999, the trading card game was introduced, heightening to fever-pitch the furor over Pokemon (Pok Case Study 13). By July of 1999, the Pokemon industry had generated more than \$5 billion worldwide (Nintendo). Certainly the Pokemon phenomenon owes much of its success to the carefully constructed concept of the Pokemon world itself. However, without the brilliantly conceived marketing described briefly above, Pokemon would never have had the social force to which it lays claim. Neither could it so thoroughly conform to a secular definition of religion without this initial corporate-driven permeation into American culture.

[6] Pokemon's ability to function as a secular religion has emerged in the absence of a strong traditional value system. Recently, churches have deemphasized aspects of the supernatural and ritual, leaving people "spiritually hungry" for any manner of contact with the transcendent (Encyc. of Religion 395). The number of young people who belong

to specific religious traditions has also declined over the past few decades (Clark 5). The decline of the traditional nuclear family has paralleled the decay of institutional religion (Clark 7) as more and more children live in single-parent homes. Additionally, the postindustrial economy has reduced the amount of time families have to spend together; more parents have had to commit to long hours and/or multiple jobs in the service industry, which offers low pay and little security. Those parents with higher-paying positions are still typically working long hours (Clark 7). Furthermore, most mothers now work outside of the home (Clark 7). As a result of these social forces, young people have been forced to radically redefine their concepts of religion and family.

[7] Upon this mass of cultural disorientation, Pokemon, according to Nintendo, applied “ideals which are as old as childhood itself. Gathering and nurturing. Trading and competing. The affection for creatures and the magic of surprise” (Nintendo). When these “ideals” are compared to a functional definition of religion such as that espoused by anthropologist Clifford Geertz, they take on the appearance function of a secular religion.

[8] Geertz defines religion as “a set of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men [sic] by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (Geertz 1973, in Lyden 42). This defines religion not by its theology but by its social function (Lyden 42). The detailed construction of the Pokemon universe, as well as the aggressive

marketing behind the campaign, allow enable these monsters to conform perfectly to Geertz's definition.

[9] First, for Geertz, religion consists of a set of symbols must provide both beliefs and ethical values (Geertz 1973, in Lyden 42). Pokemon clearly demonstrates a strong ethic in favor of compassion and order. The "heroes" of the show display values of honesty, kindness, and nobility. The series also thoroughly maintains a dualistic belief system of good versus evil. In this system good ultimately triumphs, and in this respect it is not unlike mainstream Christianity.

[10] Consider Episode 6, entitled *Clefairy and the Moon Stone*. Ash, Brock, and Misty are traveling to the caves of Mount Moon. As they approach the caves, our heroes observe a Pokemon researcher under attack by a group of Zubats (a stylized and supernaturally gifted version of the standard bat). After Pikachu defeats the Zubats in a Pokemon battle, the researcher offers to guide them through the caves. In the caves, they next encounter a number of Pokemon injured by the destruction of their habitat by human explorers seeking the legendary Moon Stone, a magical rock that has the ability to "power up" Pokemon. Horrified by the state of the cave, Pokemon, Ash and his friends team up with a group of Clefaires (a sweet-tempered species of Pokemon along the lines of an anthropomorphized soap bubble in possession of a squirrel's tail) to thwart Team Rocket, who are searching for the stone in order to pursue their own wicked ends. In the process, our heroes discover the Moon Stone themselves and use it to restore the health of the Pokemon harmed by the previous explorers (Pokevillage).

[11] Here we see the prosocial ethic at its best. In reward for helping a stranger in distress, Ash and his friends receive a guide through the caves (good is rewarded). When they witness the injured Pokemon and learn of their situation, the protagonists are suitably appalled (social injustice and harming the environment are wrong). They are joined by a group of Clefairies in rectifying the situation (teamwork is good). In the end, Team Rocket, a personification of all those who harm the environment, is defeated (good triumphs over evil). Additionally, the protagonists themselves find the Moon Stone, which they use to help others (good is rewarded; good fortune should be shared with others). The altruistic social ethic exhibited throughout this episode, similar to that espoused by many religions, is typical of the series as a whole. There are more than 100 episodes of the series, each one reiterating in various manners the values and implied beliefs described above.

[12] Geertz's second criteria states that the symbols which present these beliefs must also establish powerful moods and motivations (Geertz 1973, in Lyden 42). If the audience has previously bought into the good/evil duality put forward by the symbols of the Pokemon universe, they will perforce experience moods and motivations to that effect. They will be motivated to ensure that good will prevail over evil, will feel exultant and vindicated when it does, and disquieted when it does not. Furthermore, the show encourages children to identify with the characters exhibiting positive ethics and socially-acceptable values. Due to a heightened eidetic ability (defined by psychologists as the ability to conjure "vivid visual images of specific objects that are not present in actuality, but are present to the conscious or subconscious imagination," and demonstrated to be

present in children to a greater degree than in adults (Lambouras 1996, in Clark 6), young viewers are particularly disposed to assume the moods and motivations of the fictive characters of the series so that the line between “Pikachu’s values” and “my own values” blurs and eventually vanishes altogether.

[13] Third, these moods and motivations must, for Geertz, conceive of a general order of existence (Geertz 1973, in Lyden 42-43). Geertz states that, “the primary purpose of religious symbols is to deal with the encroachment of chaos on our lives and to offer a sense that life is meaningful and orderly in spite of the challenges of chaos” (Geertz 1973, in Lyden 43). Monsters are symbols of chaos and the Pokemon realm imposes a clearly-defined world order upon them. Humans have established physical mastery over these “pocket monsters.” When there is no immediate need for a Pokemon, it is confined to a red-and-white, pocket-sized ball, from which it may not emerge unless called. Pokemon are not even allowed to use their powers unless the human master directs it. The Pokemon has no other purpose but to serve as a weapon for its master. In addition to physical mastery, detailed information about the each species of Pokemon is carefully recorded and readily available to humans on the trading cards and in the game’s electronic Pokemon index (or “pokedex”). In the Pokemon universe, an entire industry comprised of scientists, explorers, and doctors is devoted to the study and documentation of Pokemon. Scientific documentation of a phenomenon is a means of control, placing observers on sure footing where once they faced the unknown. Once a chaos monster is documented and controlled in this manner, it loses its effectiveness.

[14] Monsters have a supernatural appeal that elicits “a need to feel competent and powerful in the face of powers beyond one’s control” (Clark 6). To a child, then, a monster is a personification of all the societal forces beyond his or her control. In Pokemon, these forces are presented not as fearsome and hideous, but as friendly, cuddly helpmates. By demythologizing, befriending, and dominating such chaotic threats, Pokemon aims to ultimately bolster the self-confidence of its audience. This was a natural progression for a society that believes that the development of a healthy self-image is of paramount importance for children. Modern trends in child psychology propound this concept repeatedly. The Child Development Institute, for example, states that “self-esteem is a major key to success in life. The development of a positive self-concept or healthy self-esteem is extremely important to the happiness and success of children and teenagers” (CDI). Hence the socially-functional-monsters movement. By transmogrifying monsters, the objects of fear, into innocuous characters like Cookie Monster, Elmo, or Pikachu, children are made to feel safe and therefore confident. Pokemon takes this concept beyond any other form of monster media. Pokemon are not merely banal friends or teachers; they are actually subjugated by human children. The child experiences a direct sense of power over a supernatural being. Such personal control is nothing short of theistic.

[15] The extensive documentation of the Pokemon universe, through such media as trading cards and “pokedexes,” serves to meet Geertz’s fourth requirement: that the world order must be cloaked in an aura of factuality (Geertz 1973, in Lyden 42). Comprehensive knowledge of details is often taken as a sign of veracity. Although on the

surface children may know that Pokemon are imaginary, this fact is easily forgotten when one's pokedex is capable of informing one what Bulbasaur likes best to eat. This aura of factuality must also make the moods and motivations seem real (Geertz 1973, in Lyden 42, 44). The real world must be viewed merely as "the partial form of a wider reality which corrects and completes it," (Geertz 1973, in Lyden 44). Every detail of the Pokemon universe is so thoroughly explicated that children are able to access it at will through the merchandise and perceive it as a complete entity in its own right. Thus there are no grounds for dismissing the reality of this parallel universe, despite the fact that children do not encounter actual Pokemon in their own world. The enhanced eidetic ability of children, mentioned above, also aids in conjuring this aura of factuality. Further, the pro-social values a child assumes in the Pokemon world, through close identification with the characters, carry over into the real world to positive responses from adults. Society's appreciation for good, compassionate, organized children renders the Pokemon world eternally relevant.

[16] The Pokemon fervor began to die down after the year 2000. However, the enormous success of Pokemon sparked numerous copycat product lines. Digimon (a concept almost identical to Pokemon) rivaled Pokemon in popularity in 2000 (Pok Case Study 13). Since then, Yu-Gi-Oh (a similar trading card/movie/television conglomeration) has superseded them both in popularity. Neither of these competitors, however, can compare to Pokemon in pure societal impact. Indeed, Pokemon created the market for the monsters as trading cards/movies/television. Pokemon's extraordinary success resulted from its ability to meet a number of societal needs, particularly the need

for a secular religion. However, the intensity of the Pokemon momentum was not socially sustainable. It collapsed upon itself around 2000 due to massive overexposure.

Nevertheless, a small market still remains for Pokemon products which are still produced (albeit on a much smaller scale). This gentler version is, perhaps, preferable to the overwhelming fervor of the late 90's. Yet Pokemon, with its prolonged cultural lifespan, still continues to act as a secular religion in accordance with Geertz's definition to children who feel the need.

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