

In their recent paper (available [here](#)) in Journal of Cognition and Culture, Will M. Gervais and Joseph Henrich call attention to the Zeus problem. If religious belief is solely guided by representational content biases (as many scholars in the cognitive science of religion have argued), why do people generally not come to believe in the gods of their neighbours, or indeed, in gods of the past such as Zeus? Zeus has all the features that are characteristic of successful religious agents, but he is no longer a target for widespread belief and commitment. Of course, what Gervais and Henrich do not mention is that there are in fact modern believers in Zeus and other members of the Greek pantheon, namely adherents to [Hellenic Polytheistic reconstructionism](#). As can be seen in the movie [here](#), Zeus is still an object of worship today. There are about 2000 adherents to this form of paganism in Greece today.

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So is there in fact a Zeus problem? I am not so convinced, since it turns out that even religions that make no secret of their purely fictional origins are quite successful.

Carole Cusack's recently published *Invented Religions. Imagination, fiction and faith* (2010, Ashgate) provides a thorough and fascinating overview of religions that have been invented in the course of the 20th century. In several cases, these religions have their roots in fictional works, including Jediism (which is based on the fictional religion in the successful Star Wars franchise) and the Church of All Worlds, which is based on a fictional religion that was invented by Robert Heinlein in his novel *Stranger in a strange land*.



Although it remains unclear what the long-term success of these invented religions will be, at present they do have adherents. What explains the success of religions that do not invoke revelation, a continuity with older traditions, or holy books (as other recent religions such as Mormonism)? Perhaps content biases can provide a compelling answer. As Cusack (2010: 4) mentions "In the case of the Church of all Worlds, its founders thought Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a strange land* was a fiction so good it should actually be true".

It would be interesting to pit the religious agents from invented religions against Justin Barrett's (2008, *Why Santa Claus is not a god*. *Journal of Cognition and Culture*, 8, 149-161) five features that according to him are typical of representations that have godly status - i.e., they violate ontological expectations, they are minimally counterintuitive, they possess strategic information, they have detectable interaction, and they have representational content that motivates ritual and other religious practice.