
BOOK REVIEW

Cusack, Carole and Alex Norman, eds. 2012. *Handbook of New Religions and Cultural Production*. Leiden: Brill. xxix + 789pp. ISBN 978 90 04 22187 1. Hbk. ISBN 978 90 04 22648 7 (e-book). €228.00 (hbk and e-book).

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A book of this size looks formidable, but one should not judge by outward appearances. The *Handbook of New Religions and Cultural Production* is actually extremely readable, providing a new dimension to the study of new religious movements (NRMs). It is not possible in a short review to itemize every author or to survey all the chapters in any detail. Readers can find the chapter titles individually by visiting the online edition on Brill's website, where it is possible to purchase electronic versions of individual chapters at a more modest cost than the entire volume.

The notion of cultural production includes, but goes beyond, Ninian Smart's notion of the "material dimension" of religion. Smart employed the concept to designate sacred spaces and objects, principally used by religious practitioners. Carole Cusack and Alex Norman widen the concept to encompass performance (for example, music, dance and poetry reading), as well as the more obvious cultural products of art and architecture. The cultural products discussed in the volume are not necessarily used for ritual purposes; many can be appreciated and enjoyed by those outside the spiritual community, as well as the insider. Thus, the first section of the book—on Latter-day Saints—not only has a chapter on temples in Mormon history, but subsequent chapters deal with Mormon science-fiction and Mormon comedy.

The book is divided into nine parts. The Mormon section is followed by sections on theosophy, anthroposophy, and Gurdjieff, and ranges over themes such as healing therapies, education, Gurdjieff's piano music and sacred dances, and—remarkably—Rudolf Steiner's biodynamic agricultural method. A further section is on modern Paganism, with chapters on folk music, bardic chairs, and Robert Anton Wilson's Discordian writings. A section on Afro-Caribbean new religions follows—a topic that is often overlooked in NRM studies—and includes a chapter on the creative energy of *Ashe*, the relationship between art and *Candoblé*, and *reggae* as a cultural production from the Rastafari.

The section on "New Religious Techniques and Technologies" is somewhat of an assortment, spanning Portugal's Boom Festival, the Metal Band *Thérion's* relation to *Dragon Rouge*, and L. Ron Hubbard's *Battlefield Earth*. Hubbard's Scientology is frequently dismissed as a

“sci-fi religion,” but Adam Possami and Alphia Possamai-Inesedy’s chapter ably demonstrates the way in which Hubbard expresses barred which Scientology’s religious his religious philosophy in his fictional writings.

“New Universal Religions” ensues, by which the editors mean religions that have spread worldwide from their countries of origin, and includes a chapter on Baha’i temples, and a discussion of the cultural products of Global Sufism, most notably its dancing dervishes and the *sama*’ (“spiritual concerts”) of the Sufi mystics. Christopher Hartney’s chapter on the Cao Dai provides a fascinating introduction to the construction of its distinctive temples, as well as an introduction to this NRM on which there is little literature. Benjamin E. Zeller explores the idea of food as cultural production in his chapter on the Hare Krishna movement. Not only is food an important, but often neglected, aspect of religion, but Zeller argues that the devotees’ distribution of *prasadam* has frequently been a means by which the public were first introduced to Krishna consciousness.

The final part covers some unexpected topics, relating to movements on the fringe of Christianity. The first of these relates to GLTBI (gay, lesbian, transsexual, bisexual and intersexed) issues with specific reference to Sydney House as a community for expressing “queer spirituality.” This is followed by a chapter on the Deep Sea Canoe Movement, whose cultural product—the Lost Temple of Jerusalem—is not an observable edifice but is, as a matter of faith, believed to be concealed within the mountains of Malaita. Finally, a chapter entitled “Visible Religion, Visible Spirituality” explores the boundaries of taste and acceptability in religious creativity, ending with Pope Alice and her relationship to Raelian ideas.

With any anthology, it is always possible for a reviewer to take issue with the book’s content or organization. Given the amount of material and the range of ground that is covered, the editors deserve congratulation for the book’s scope and quality. There are no chapters that disappoint and, despite the book’s specific focus on cultural production, several of the contributions serve as excellent introductions to the NRMs under discussion. The book also has a marked antipodean flavour: some two thirds of the contributors are based either in Australia or New Zealand. However, since much of NRM studies has focused on the United States and Europe, this is a welcome counterbalance.

It may be worth observing that there is little material on the cultural production of new Buddhist groups. Perhaps this is because most of their cultural production draws on more ancient forms of Buddhism, but there might have been scope for discussing the Nipponzan Myohoji’s peace pagodas, or the stained-glass at Thich Nhat Hanh’s Plum Village near Bordeaux, in which the Buddha and Jesus are juxtaposed. Perhaps too, consideration might have been given to cultural products that do not readily fit into textbook categorizations: Bangkok’s Erawan shrine, constructed in 1956, is one such example, although perhaps not widely known until the 2015 bombing. Inevitably, organizations in which there is little cultural production are excluded, for example Jewish and Protestant-related groups, who tend to avoid iconography, regarding it as a violation of the Ten Commandments, which prohibit “graven images.”

The fact that one can suggest so many additional possibilities for inclusion is not so much a criticism, but an endorsement of the editors’ expressed belief that cultural production has been unduly neglected, and is a fruitful and an important topic for academic investigation. This *Handbook* is a most welcome introduction to an area which merits further exploration in NRM studies.