
BOOK REVIEW

Sutcliffe, Steven J., and Carole M. Cusack, eds. 2017. *The Problem of Invented Religions*. Oxford and New York: Routledge. x + 152 pp. ISBN: 978-1-138-09903-6 (pbk). £42.99.

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This volume is dedicated to the topic of invented religions, a category that Carole M. Cusack previously defined in her pioneering work *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith* (2010), a scholarly analysis of six invented religions which arose from the late 1950s onwards. *The Problem of Invented Religions* extends Cusack's prior scholarship in this area. Originally published as a special issue of the journal *Culture and Religion*, the book consists of an introduction and eight chapters; four chapters address key theoretical issues and four chapters are devoted to case studies. In the Introduction, editors Steven J. Sutcliffe and Cusack outline the aims of the volume, introduce key terms and place the category of invented religion in a wider theoretical context. While all religions are in a sense socially constructed, invented religions are posited to be unique in that they announce and embrace their invented status as a key feature of their identity. Instead of appealing to traditional strategies of authorization, "invented religions by definition happily appropriate a term or label which might previously have been used to render them 'other' and hence inferior, and use it for their own self-definition" (p. 5).

The first two chapters develop the theoretical base of the invented religion category, with a specific focus on themes of fiction, narrative and play. In Chapter 1, Cusack presents three arguments that support her thesis that invented religions are "a particular cultural form of the human impulse to religion, appropriate to the twenty-first century West" (p. 10). Drawing on Robert Bellah's (*Religion in Human Evolution: From the Palaeolithic to the Axial Age*, 2011) model of the origin and development of religion in human evolution, Cusack posits that processes of play and narrative are central to the formation and ongoing existence of religion per se, and that invented religions are theoretically important because they clearly reveal how these processes develop. In Chapter 2, Markus Altena Davidsen addresses the issue of terminology. He argues that "fiction-based religion" (as opposed to Cusack's "invented religion" or Adam Possamai's "hyper-real religion") is the more accurate term as these movements use fictional texts as a resource for the construction of religious beliefs, practices and identities. Davidsen draws an analytical distinction between the religious use of fiction and "fandom", which he defines as a "playful engagement with fiction" (p. 28).

The next four chapters consist of case studies. Danielle L. Kirby (Chapter 3) explores how fictional texts function in the contemporary occulture milieu. Kirby identifies five

distinctive ways that fiction is utilized by various groups, including the Church of All Worlds, Jediism, Sithism, the Otherkin, contemporary Chaos Magic, the Church of the SubGenius and Synchromysticism. In Chapter 4, Essi Mäkelä and Johanna Petsche consider Discordianism—the first “invented religion” as identified by Cusack (*Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith*, 2010). Discordianism has been dismissed as a joke or ‘parody religion’; however Mäkelä and Petsche’s study of seven Finnish Discordians demonstrates that for some practitioners, the religion offers a genuinely meaningful world view. The authors employ Finnish academic Teemu Taira’s model of “liquid” religion to illustrate how Discordianism’s absurdist beliefs and practices “liquefy” the boundary between the sacred and the profane, concluding that while the religion may have started as a joke, it has since transformed into a “serious parody”. In Chapter 5, Sutcliffe explores ‘hidden transmission’ as a legitimization strategy in three Rosicrucian groups—Wicca, Findhorn and the Rosicrucian Order, Crotona Fellowship. He posits that mixed legitimization strategies that combine both historical and imaginative sources provide an adaptive advantage over approaches that rely on invention only. Finally, Michael Stausberg and Anna Tessmann (Chapter 6) consider to what extent the appropriation of a religion, in this case a form of “new age” Zoroastrianism, constitutes an invented religion.

The final chapters offer theoretical perspectives regarding the significance of the category of invented religion for the academic study of religion. Paul-Francois Tremlett (Chapter 7) argues that terms such as “fake”, “hyper-real” and “invented” are symptomatic of a “crisis of method” in religion studies (p. 121). He invites scholars to interrogate their methodologies and to consider how invented religions might disrupt the category of religion as a *sui generis* phenomenon, potentially leading to theoretical advancements in the field. The volume concludes with Teemu Taira’s chapter (Chapter 8), which rejects the categorical value of “invented religion” entirely. Taira proposes an alternative theoretical framework that doesn’t rely on narrative or fiction and that is more inclusive of diverse religious formations that are deliberately invented but don’t have a “clear fictional anchor” (he cites the example of the Swedish-based Missionary Church of Kopimism) (p. 129). Taira’s thesis focuses on the role of power relations in religious construction; he is concerned with the practical interests and potential consequences that arise when something is classified as religious (p. 131).

The Problem of Invented Religions is an excellent piece of scholarship that highlights the theoretical and practical value of the study of invented religions. To an outsider, such religions may at first glance seem inconsequential; however, the theses in this volume demonstrate their significance for academia and for society at large. As Taira points out, defining religion is an important task: “definitions of religion are part of how society organizes itself, and definitions have consequences” (p. 130). The case studies presented here reveal that even religious formations that emphasize fiction, parody and play can have serious consequences. Future research might examine this connection more closely. For example, by exploring how the origins of the modern Illuminati conspiracy theory—which has arguably experienced a renaissance in some New Age communities since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic—has roots in a Discordian prank (circa 1975) which was designed to undermine people’s faith in authority and destabilize the dominant cultural narrative.

In sum, *The Problem of Invented Religions* is a must-read for anyone with an interest in the academic study of religion, particularly new religious movements and alternative spiritualities. It is also highly recommended as a teaching resource for university courses which consider the theory and methodology of religion studies and the role of religion in society.