

Book Review

Paul O'Connor, *Skateboarding and Religion*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 304, ISBN: 9783030248598 (pbk). EUR 49.99.

'Skateboarding is the most religious of all contemporary sports and yet hardly anyone notices', Paul O'Connor argues in this extensively researched, globally relevant and theoretically sophisticated book (p. 288). Drawing on interviews with often middle-aged skateboarders from around the world, and extensive literature from sociology, anthropology and religion studies, O'Connor engages with religion and skateboarding in three contrasting forms. Firstly, with skateboarding as a form of religion, specifically an individualized 'lifestyle religion'. Secondly, with skateboarding as a culture preoccupied with religious imagery and analogy. Thirdly, with skateboarding as a vehicle for the pastoral and missional activities of established religions, primarily American evangelicalism but also South-East Asian Islam.

The bulk of the book is concerned with the notion of skateboarding as a lifestyle religion, a way of thinking through the complexities of individualization, commercialization and a kind of anti-commercial sanctification of an initially DIY culture that now incorporates millionaire celebrities and child Olympians. O'Connor draws heavily on Geertz's cultural definition of religion, and while some scholars might feel he collapses religion into culture too thoroughly, or that different frameworks might describe the individual devotion and cultural thickness of contemporary skateboarding adequately but more modestly, including serious leisure, O'Connor makes a convincing case for the legitimacy of the notion for at least some skateboarders. This skateboarding-as-religion thesis is most persuasive in the focus on DIY skateboarding religions in chapter 10, as well as the focus on rituals in chapter 8, making use of Catherine Bell's six-part schema. The carnivalesque nature of skateboarding, the 'ritual cleansing of mundane non-places', and notion of the skateboard as a 'portable carnival' (pp. 194–97), are particularly evocative, as is the notion of skateboarding pilgrimages to obscure and often inaccessible places, usually staircases (pp. 147–77).

While O'Connor's focus is clearly theorizing skateboarding as a lifestyle religion, engagements between skateboarding culture and

conventional religion are taken up in the discussion of skateboarding iconography in chapter 5, specifically the art of skateboards themselves, and the analysis of Christian and Muslim pastoral and missional engagement with skateboarders in chapter 9. These sections challenge some aspects of O'Connor's broader skateboarding-as-religion thesis. For example, although he persuasively argues that the ubiquity of supernatural skateboarding imagery points to the 'heterodox' nature of skate culture, 'questioning the norms of society and striving to see the world differently', rather than merely rejecting religion, skateboarders are shown to be cautious around religious and occult imagery, especially in Islamic contexts (pp. 96–101, 115–16). This example reflects the broader ambiguity of the place of skateboarding in contemporary societies, analysed in early chapters, with the culture's rebellious image sitting uncomfortably with its commercial popularity, itself not entirely consistent with ongoing public restrictions on skateboarding. The idea of skateboarding as 'a legitimate form of deviance' (p. 12) seems satisfyingly contradictory.

The deeper challenge to the broader skateboarding-as-religion thesis comes from O'Connor's engagement with evangelical skateboarding ministries in chapter 9. These Christian skateboarders are dismissive of the notion of skateboarding's innately spiritual or 'enlightening' nature, viewing it as a leisure activity with its own complex subculture, but no less in need of evangelization (pp. 219–20, 233). I would have liked these tensions to be further explored, as they suggest O'Connor may have reached a position that, however intellectually satisfying, overshoots the self-understanding of conventionally religious skateboarders themselves. Nevertheless, *Skateboarding and Religion* sets out a strong argument for future researchers to wrestle with, and this book will be essential reading for scholars of religion and sport and religion and subcultures. O'Connor has done an awful lot of theoretical heavy lifting here, and his critical insider approach does not shy away from the many complexities and contradictions of contemporary skateboarding culture.

Ibrahim Abraham

Australian National University