

Book Reviews

Carole M. Cusack, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith*. Ashgate, Aldershot, 2009, pp. 186, ISBN 978-0-7546-6780-3 (Hbk). Review doi: 10.1558/arsr.v24i3.361.

In our Western society dominated by the consumption of novelties, one might wonder if this post-WWII pattern would affect (or stain?) religion as well. Religion, from a social scientific perspective, is not, needless to say, independent from a social and cultural context, and has not been left untouched by a shift to a post- or late-modern world. Part of these late-modern novelties, in this context, are found in the invention of religions from popular culture. These invented religions re-shape popular cultural discourses for religious (or quasi- or pseudo-religious) purposes.

To explore these invented religions, Cusack dedicates a chapter each to Discordianism, the Church of All Worlds, and the Church of the SubGenius. In this field of research, this is the first time that such extensive academic research has covered these groups. Taking into account that these groups have been around for some time, Cusack's book fills up a much awaited gap in our knowledge. Discordianism is now over fifty years old and has been described as an American form of Zen Buddhism. It was created by free thinking 'nerds' inspired by *MAD* magazine, science fiction, poetry and philosophy. The Church of All Worlds was founded in 1962 and took great inspiration from the Science Fiction novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* by Robert Heinlein. It sees itself as a network of neo-pagans and also gets inspiration from Star Trek and, more recently, from the Harry Potter stories. The Church of the SubGenius came from Texas in 1979, and its mythos includes aliens and space ships, a mutant race that is part human and part Yeti, and the 'Elder Gods'. Cusack also dedicates a chapter to third-millennium cases such as Jediism, Matrixism and the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster.

When taking a sociological perspective, especially a Marxist one, one could easily argue that we did not have to wait for late modernity to find invented religions, as this label could be applied to all religions and could be read as a tautological expression. Cusack, in her book, moves away from this debate by focusing on explicit post-WWII invented fictional religions. There have been new twentieth-century religious movements that have re-invented the past, found some forgotten historical connections, or reinstated an ancient tradition, to justify their current existence. They do offer novelties, but because they cement their existence in a reality, they are not part of the focus of this book. Instead, groups that are upfront about their invention are here under scrutiny. There is no hiding from the fact that these new invented religions are blatantly inspired by, for example, the Star Wars mythology, the Matrix movies and the recently-created fictional character, the Flying Spaghetti Monster (created as a reaction to the push of fundamentalist Christians trying to force the exclusive teaching of creationism in schools). Popular culture is here

used as a source of inspiration, and reality, revelation or historical continuation do not need to be used to provide a justification for the existence of these invented religions.

The book concludes that because of their blatant connection with popular culture, these invented religions are often dismissed as less than legitimate. However, Cusack's research takes the side that, as these invented religions are meaningful to their members, they should be regarded as real religions as well, even if some outsiders, and insiders as well, would view them as parody religions. The new field of religion and popular culture, in which popular culture takes an active part in the creation of religion, rather than simply offering a religious message in its text, is a recent and growing field. Cusack's book is to be placed as a key piece of work in the academic task of advancing knowledge in this field. Her extensive and well-grounded research on these case studies is of high interest for anyone interested in the study of religion and/or popular culture.

Adam Possamai
University of Western Sydney