
This fascinating study examines what are termed ‘invented’ religions, a provocative description which immediately brings to mind the assumption that some religions are not invented but rather, ‘true’. The book proposes that humans are meaning-making creatures that find certain types of narrative powerful, particularly those wherein unseen agents effect causality in the world. It aims to demonstrate that this human penchant for story can be expressed through religion which is now more secular and simply another form of consumption manifesting through personal selection and construction; and that the futuristic imagination exemplified in science fiction forms a large part of the inspiration of the invented religions that are the topics of this study.

The invented religion case studies include Discordianism, founded in 1957 by Gregory Hill and Kerry Wendell Thornley; the Church of All Worlds founded in 1962 by Tim Zell and Richard Lance Christie; and the Church of the SubGenius which emerged in 1979 after Douglass St Clair Smith and Doctor Philo Drummond distributed a provocative pamphlet – although the church myth claims that it was founded in 1953 by J. R. ‘Bob’ Dobbs. Each of these religions is examined in their own chapters, while a subsequent chapter focuses on third-millennium invented religions such as Jedism, Matrixism, and the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, and the Conclusion revisits and reflects on the creative meanings and effects introduced into the wider religious landscape by the invented religions.

The book starts off with an introductory chapter, titled ‘Imagination, Fiction and Faith’, in which Cusack explains how the concept of ‘invented religions’ is a direct challenge to traditional ideas of religions as systems that were ‘received’ by humans in special communication with supernatural beings, or which have origins so far back in the past that they have achieved venerability simply because they are so old. Calling a religion ‘invented’ therefore, is often a dismissive term, but Cusack argues that such ‘new religions are the site of major innovations and spiritual beliefs and practices, and furthermore are imbricated with popular cultural forms’ which reveal interesting information about contemporary society (p. 5).

Chapter 1, ‘The Contemporary Context of Invented Religions’, sets the scene by explaining the social trends, such as secularization and consumer culture in Western society, that have paved the way for the plethora of religions available in the ‘spiritual supermarket’ today. It focuses on new religions that emerged from the 1950s, and then discusses invented religions within the study of religions more broadly. Focussing on cognitive and evolutionary theories of religion, Cusack proposes that invented religions are highly imaginative and creative and that they work in conjunction with aspects of popular culture such as film and science fiction to reflect society as well as stimulate imagination. She claims that interpreting
invented religions as ‘fake religions’ is an unfair and an inadequate dismissal of them because not only do they follow the observed form of religious blueprinting, such as involving myths and sacred histories about invisible beings causing change within the world, but also because the narratives proposed by the invented religions are externalized into popular culture, acquire independent existence, and are then re-internalized, they therefore become, at least to their adherents, ‘true’ (p. 25).

Chapter 2 focuses on the religion of Discordianism which is devoted to the ancient Greek goddess of strife, Eris, the personification of discord, or in this book, chaos. This goddess is a literary figure, or more accurately a device, who appears in ancient Greek literature such as Homer’s Iliad in battle scenes and is probably most famous for her instrumental role in the judgement of Paris which began the Trojan War. Eris is purely a literary character and did not have any sort of cult in ancient Greece. This chapter examines the origins and history of Discordianism, its Zen-like teachings, its relationship to conspiracy theories, and to ancient Greek religion and contemporary Paganism. What began as a joke is shown to have developed various kinds of real presence and affect, particularly for the founders of the religion who each experienced various kinds of personal chaos, but also for other members, perhaps somewhat more theoretically through recognizing that what happens in the physical world is often dependant on mysterious, uncontrollable, and seemingly random causes.

The third chapter focuses on the Church of All Worlds which is primarily based on science fiction writer Robert A. Heinlein’s 1961 novel Stranger in a Strange Land, but which incorporates aspects of contemporary Paganism such as goddess-worship and reverence for the earth. What results is a merger between aspects of Heinlein’s story about a messianic Martian on earth – including polyamorous relationships, sacred water-sharing, small group-organising into ‘nests’, and seeing ‘God/dess’ within each human being – and aspects of modern Wiccan-based theology such as a god and goddess pair, the practice of magic and seasonal ritual. The Church of All Worlds also has a stronger environmental focus than much Wiccan-based Paganism, seeing Planet Earth as a literal divinity, Gaia. Cusack argues that the environmentalism of the Church of All Worlds makes this a genuinely ecotheological religion. The interest in science fiction by its founders means that the Church of All Worlds is also very forward-looking and encourages the creation of positive, life-affirming multispecies-honouring future societies on other worlds, not only on Earth.

In the fourth chapter, ‘The Church of the SubGenius: Science Fiction Mythos, Culture Jamming and the Sacredness of Slack’, Cusack explains that while often considered to be a ‘parody religion’, through the production of absurdist art and literature in dialogue with popular cultural elements such as ‘science fiction, conspiracy theories, and the countercultural parody of materialism’, the Church enacts its wider aim of ‘culture-jamming’, thus forcing what it terms ‘guerrilla enlightenment’ (p. 84). The Church of the SubGenius is shown to be one that destabilizes certainty, challenges the outrageous claims of other religions but also makes them itself, although does so as part of using irrationality and humour to stimulate scepticism towards the status quo and active thinking rather than passive acceptance of religious – or any – dogma.

Third-millennium CE invented religions such as Jediism, Matrixism, and the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, are examined in Chapter 5. Cusack shows how Jediism and Matrixism were based on popular films that were thought to be so good by fans that they should have an existence in real life, while the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster was a response to the teaching of Creationism – under
the guise of ‘Intelligent Design’ – alongside Darwinian Evolution within the school curriculum in Kansas USA. Cusack shows that these religions are all characterised by resistance to unethical, late capitalist, anti-science ideologies, both religious and secular.

The book concludes that the so-called ‘invented religions’ studied here are not fake, but rather creative productions that reflect contemporary culture, as well as human imagination and even playfulness. Cusack argues that the ‘invented’ nature of these religions is irrelevant because they do not adhere to the old model of Christianity – once the Ur-model for what a religion ‘is’ – but to a newer model that accepts a broader definition of what constitutes ‘legitimate’ religion and spirituality (p. 142) which includes religions that are overtly creative and often visionary projects based on fictions, and which also utilise humour and irreverence (p. 149).

This is a highly stimulating study of new religious movements that cross the boundaries of theism, performance art, environmentalism, and utopianism. Although this book is quite small, at 179 pages, it is densely packed with information and analysis, with copious footnotes, a large bibliography, and handy index. One of the prominent themes throughout the book is the relationship between the formation – or invention – of the new religions examined here and aspects of popular culture such as science fiction literature and film; another is dissemination through the internet. Cusack has successfully demonstrated that these religions are both invented religions and real religions. The book therefore broadens the category of what can be termed ‘religion’ and is simultaneously a call for religious tolerance and openness to experimentation.

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