[*The Pomegranate* 14.2 (2012) 317-320]
doi: 10.1558/pome.v14i2.320
ISSN 1528-0268 (print)
ISSN 1743-1735 (online)

Carole M. Cusack, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction, and Faith* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2010), 179 pp., $89.96 (cloth), $79.96 (e-book).

Despite the fact that all religions were in some sense "invented"—in other words, each was once an innovative deviation from the norm—scholars and others have been reluctant to take some new religions seriously. In *Invented Religions,* Carole Cusack looks at six religions that were self-consciously created and have their roots in works of fiction or popular culture. Cusack argues that these religions are expressions of, or reactions to, the consumer capitalism and secularization of the historical moment. Cusack understands "secularization" through a revision of Peter Berger's definition: secularization in this case does not mean the decline and disappearance of religion, but rather the weakening of traditional religious institutions and symbols. In the space left by the Christian institutions of the past, Cusack sees the free-for-all consumerism of the spiritual marketplace filling the gap: individuals and groups innovate beliefs and practices freely, but those same beliefs and practices are rapidly commodified and sold as religious "products" to the spiritually discerning buyer. In this postmodern environment, the institutional structures that once mediated truth no longer have authority, and the line between the religious and secular is blurred. Scripture has no more inherent authority than fiction, and so inspiring fictions can be appropriated for religious purposes, regardless of whether their creators had anything more than commercial intent.

Cusack profiles three new religions in depth: Discordianism, the Church of All Worlds, and the Church of the SubGenius. Jediism (from the *Star Wars* series), Matrixism, and the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster are covered more briefly in an additional chapter. The greatest strength of the book is in the detailed historical attention given the first three groups. She carefully traces the development of Discordianism from the first five photocopies of the hilariously anarchic spiritual text *Principia Discordia* through its popularization in the *Illuminatus!* novels of Robert Anton Wilson and Robert Shea to its increasing ties with and integration into the contemporary Pagan movement. The religion and its founders, Kerry Thornley and Greg Hill, are situated in the context of Cold War politics while Thornley's

real-life involvement with the investigation of the Kennedy assassination provides context for the Discordian interest in conspiracy theories. The movement's emphasis on laughter and play as necessary for spiritual health as well as its simultaneous embrace and rejection of dualistic thinking parallels attitudes found in certain Eastern mysticisms. Its reverence for Eris, goddess of chaos, connects it to contemporary Pagan practices.

The Church of All Worlds is described with special attention to the autobiographies of Oberon Zell-Ravenheart (born Tim Zell) and his partner Morning Glory. Originally inspired by the religion of Robert A. Heinlein's novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*, as well as by the libertarian politics of Ayn Rand and the human potential group Atl, the Church of All Worlds maintains its commitment to ethical nonmonogamy and radical honesty in relationships. Most of its practices, however, actively evolved as part of the broader contemporary Pagan movement. Cusack notes that CAW's futurism and commitment to science was somewhat unique in 1970s Paganism; it may have been through CAW's magazine *Green Egg* that the pantheist image of the Goddess as a holistic, ecological system first entered the Pagan movement in force.

Cusack's treatment of the Church of the SubGenius provides the most detail about the lived experience of these invented religions' adherents. SubGenius "devivals"—large gatherings that are patterned after evangelical tent revivals and include music, risqué performance art, and parodic, ranting sermons—are described in detail, as is the SubGenius philosophy of eschewing work and cultivating "slack." The worship of the iconic image of J. R. Bob Dobbs (whose clip-art style visage resembles that of a door-to-door salesman from the 1950s) focuses the SubGenius rejection of capitalism and the Protestant work ethic. Similar to Discordianism, with which the church shares roots, SubGenius participants see Western society as constraining individuality to the point of suffocation. Their practices, which parody evangelical megachurches and Scientology, embrace creativity and freedom through laughter and anarchic politics.

If the strength of *Invented Religions* is in its attention to historical detail, its weakness is in its relative lack of ethnographic engagement with the communities it studies. This flaw is least noticeable in the SubGenius chapter, where Cusack was able to draw on ethnographic studies done by other scholars. In the Discordian and CAW discussions, however, the book focuses on the movements' leaders to the exclusion of their practitioners. In neither case does the

reader get a clear picture of the lived experience of a twenty-first-century Discordian or Church of All Worlds member. Cusack is also largely uncritical of her subjects. Although she notes that Thornley and Hill's lives ended in tragedy and discusses a child custody case in which participation in the Church of the SubGenius was used against a mother, she reports notable incidents of erratic or self-destructive behavior and problematic political commitments without directly commenting on their relationship to the movements' values or worldview.

Cusack argues that invented religions are legitimate based on a functional definition of religion. Regardless of these new religions' origins, she suggests, they fulfill the traditional religious role of facilitating the creation of human meaning: providing a comprehensive worldview, ethics, practices, beliefs, and some degree of community. Yet there are qualitative distinctions between the groups that are not satisfactorily addressed. The Church of All Worlds and Discordianiam both have significant connections with the contemporary Pagan movement, which is widely recognized as religious; CAW, in fact, is fully immersed in it. Since Discordians and members of the Church of All Worlds can be commonly found leading rituals at Pagan-identified conventions and festivals, the claim that these groups are separate, delineated religions is confounded by their participation in these larger, explicitly religious settings. (The Church of the SubGenius can also be found at the heavily Pagan Starwood festival, but its members are less likely to be Pagan-identified.)

In her discussion of the Church of the SubGenius, Cusack mentions the idea that it might be best viewed as culture-jamming performance art. This argument deserves more consideration than Cusack gives it. Although she quotes Rev. Ivan Stang and others using the word "religion" to describe the church, the speakers seem to be actively co-opting, redefining, and satirizing the term (Stang, for instance, refers to the church as a "real stupid religion"). The claim to religion status is an essential part of the church's cultural critique, and Cusack provides enough ethnographic data to show that SubGenius participants find it deeply meaningful. She suggests that the church functions as a religion, even if it is not an "authentic" one. Yet if the Church of the SubGenius is indeed a new religion, it is distinctively different from CAW and even from the similarly irreverent Discordianism. Again, the relative dearth of ethnographic data leaves the reader unclear on whether the church fulfills such standard religious functions as providing practices around major life

transitions or significantly informing members' behavior outside of church activities.

The relative lack of attention to participants' experiences is particularly noticeable in the final chapter treating Jediism, Matrixism, and the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. The Church of the FSM began as political protest against the teaching of intelligent design. Although Cusack notes that the Church of the FSM has splintered and proliferated, it is unclear whether participants see it as offering more than political protest and like-minded community. Similarly, with Jediism, Cusack presents anecdotal evidence to suggest that at least a few adherents take it seriously as a religion, but her data otherwise indicates that identification with Jediism by significant numbers of people was a fad related to the Australian and UK censuses. It is well-established that films and other popular media inspire religious innovation. Yet, based on the evidence that Cusack gives, the argument that the Church of the FSM, Jediism, and Matrixism are *already* self-contained "religions" is weak: these movements do not fulfill many of the key functions of religion as identified by Cusack, although they might grow to do so in the future.

Invented Religions makes a substantial contribution to scholarship on Discordianism, the Church of all Worlds, and the Church of the SubGenius, and it provides theoretical and historical context for the study of self-consciously invented religions in general. Cusack's uncritical approach to her subjects and to classifying their groups as "religions," however, leads to holes in her argument that could be shored up with additional ethnographic research. Although she makes a solid case for these movements being studied under a religious studies framework, it is far less clear whether all (particularly the three newest) are cohesive or sustainable enough to merit recognized religions' legal protections and cultural privileges. To call all such nascent movements "religions" as opposed to seeing them as promising venues for spiritual, religious, or political experimentation may grant them a level of cultural legitimacy that is not yet merited.

Christine Hoff Kraemer
Cherry Hill Seminary