

Book Reviews

Carole M. Cusack. *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2010. vii + 179 pp. ISBN: 978-0-7546-6780-3.

Cusack argues for the typological designation ‘invented religion’ by way of illustration with chapters dedicated to Discordianism, The Church of All Worlds, The Church of the SubGenius, and a final concluding chapter on Jediism, Matrixism, and the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. As it is the first scholarly study devoted to these religions, the book marks a notable contribution to the study of new religious movements. Furthermore, her pioneering analysis convincingly challenges the tendency to dismiss religions that openly incorporate fictitious (and humorous) elements into their worldviews. Despite these obvious virtues though, *Invented Religions* suffers from two serious flaws: first, large portions of it are not sufficiently grounded in primary source research, and second, Cusack’s ahistorical, top-down approach distorts the highly idiosyncratic natures of these religions to suit the ‘invented religion’ typology.

The first chapter, “The Contemporary Context for Invented Religions,” offers a concise outline of the sociological trends that characterize late modern capitalism in so-called Western democracies, specifically individualism, secularism, and the rise of consumerism. The most substantive aspect of this chapter is Cusack’s assertion that science fiction and popular culture serve as rich inspirational resources for the new forms of spiritualities shaped by the aforementioned sociological trends. Indeed, this assertion forms the basis of the new ‘methodological paradigm’ (113) Cusack introduces, insofar as the ‘invented religion’ typology was created as a means to explain the ‘realness’ of religions that incorporate fiction into their overarching narratives. Unfortunately, Cusack fails to seriously engage the critical

discussion associated with religion as a concept, and as such, the new ‘methodological paradigm’ she attempts to justify remains underdeveloped. The most definitive assertion Cusack makes concerning religion is that the “fundamental building block of religion is narrative” (25), and that humans are meaning making agents who find stories involving unseen agents affecting the world particularly compelling (139). This approach, more directed towards how religion works than what it means, draws on cognitive theorist Pascal Boyer’s explanation of religion, which Cusack inaccurately construes as arguing that religious narratives serve an advantageous evolutionary purpose. Actually, Boyer argues that religions are not ‘adaptive,’ but non-adaptive by-products of other adaptive traits. Nevertheless, Cusack uses Boyer’s focus on narrative as the basis for her typology insofar as invented religions are defined as religions that announce their invented status (commonly originating in pre-fabricated fictional narratives), openly integrate pop culture narratives into their scripture (73), and refuse the strategies of legitimization commonly present in new religious movements, such as claiming to be a development upon a preexisting religious tradition.

The second chapter is devoted to Discordianism, the oldest invented religion under scrutiny, founded in 1958 (though Cusack follows Hugh Urban in misdating its origin to 1957). Cusack does an admirable job relaying biographical details of Discordianism’s founders, in addition to explaining its origin and rise to underground acclaim as a result of a trilogy of mass-marketed paperback novels collectively entitled *Illuminatus!* She also provides summaries of the most memorable vignettes in the 4/5th edition of the principal Discordian text (the *Principia Discordia*), details the connections between Discordianism and the JFK assassination, and concludes by reaffirming the emic assertion that Discordianism is an American form of Zen. The depth of her account is severely limited though, as Cusack displays only the most superficial awareness of Discordianism’s primary source material. Her knowledge of these essential sources seems entirely drawn from the secondary resources she consults; what’s more, her heavy reliance on these secondary sources makes her writing largely derivative.

According to her footnotes and bibliography, Cusack’s textual resources for Discordianism essentially amount to three non-academic secondary sources, *Illuminatus!*, and two redacted variants of the 4/5th edition of the *Principia*. Cusack undoubtedly knows of the existence of Discordianism’s primary sources and so it is surprising that she doesn’t attempt to explain their content, how they were produced, or the context in which they circulated. Furthermore, there are substantial oversights in the material she does reference: for example, she does not take into account that the *Principia* went

through three dramatically different versions before the Loompanics version of the 4/5th edition of the *Principa* (1979) from which she quotes; and that the two 4/5th editions she cites represent only a fraction of the innumerable versions of the Rip Off Press 4th edition (which she does not cite). The fact of the matter is that the initial 4th edition of the *Principa* published by Rip Off Press was published under an anti-copyright, and thus numerous independent publishers have issued their own variant versions of the text.

To the detriment of her analysis, Cusack neglects to explain that from 1958 to the early 1990s Discordianism was an underground religion that flourished exclusively in a D.I.Y. ('do it yourself') subculture known as the 'zine scene.' Composed of a network of cultural radicals sending self-produced anarchist, occult, and queer texts through the mail, the zine scene composed the context in which Discordianism was born, grew, and frequently mutated. Analyzed through the full range of its primary sources, namely, zines and A.P.A.s (amateur press associations), Discordianism reveals itself to be a complex and influential historical phenomenon, not least because it was the first expression of what would later develop into the Chaos Magick paradigm, to which the Church of the SubGenius also belongs.

Since the historical significance of Discordianism's ontology is absent in Cusack's text, it bears explication here. The central metaphysical tenet of Discordianism is that the absolutely generative force of Chaos, personified by Eris, characterizes existence. Based on this metaphysical supposition, Discordians have concluded that reality is not only a negotiable construct, but entirely based on self-willed creation. Ideological abstractions, belief systems, and language itself, are identified as mere tools for the construction of other, less oppressive realities. Under his *nom de plume* Hakim Bey, zine scene luminary Peter Lamborn Wilson (who Cusack mistakenly refers to as Stephen Lamborn Wilson) described Discordianism's chaos ontology as 'ontological anarchism' because it not only criticized authoritarian structures, but sought to undermine the very possibility of their existence. It is not difficult to see how this line of thinking acted as the basis for the catchphrase later adopted by the entire Chaos Magick milieu: "Nothing is True; Everything is Permitted." Lastly, it is important to note that the scholarly preoccupation with the integration of fiction into the Discordian mythos fails to appreciate how Discordians, as well as other ontological anarchists, treat *all* ideas as socially constructed 'convenient fictions' that are equally true, false, and meaningless.

The third chapter focuses on The Church of All Worlds (CAW), founded in 1962 and inspired by Robert Heinlein's science fiction novel *Stranger in a*

Strange Land, published a year earlier. Cusack has primary source material and upon this surer footing provides a cogent summary for the novel on which the religion is based, as well as explains how the CAW came to integrate goddess worship, ceremonial magick, and eco-consciousness, and outlines the continued influence of its founders on North American Paganism. Following Margot Adler, Cusack identifies the CAW's publication *Green Egg* as formative for the nascent Neo-Pagan movement, and draws attention to the leading role the religion has played in the elaboration of polyamory (a term coined by a leading member of the church). The most salient aspect of her chapter on the CAW is her description of the religion's use of legitimization strategies to cope with its origin in a work of science fiction. In fact, the CAW utilizes one of the exact strategies that Cusack claims 'invented religions' reject, namely, claiming to be development from a preexisting religious tradition. As Markus Davidsen points out in his review of this book (*Literature and Aesthetics*, 21, no. 1), members of the CAW, like those who ascribe to Jediism, Matrixism, and Discordianism, inscribe their beliefs in larger non-invented traditions (Paganism, Buddhism, Bahá'í, and Zen respectively), and thereby present themselves not as 'invented religions' but simply as new ones. This oversight not only problematizes the internal consistency of the 'invented religions' typology, but, more immediately, its necessity.

The Church of the SubGenius (COSG) is the subject of the fourth chapter. The chapter contains comprehensive overviews of both the emic account of the religion's origin and its historical origin, biographical accounts of its founders, and a detailed synopsis of the concepts upon which its beliefs and major holidays are based. Cusack does a commendable job explaining the SubGenii activities and mythos according to the four mass-marketed anthologies of SubGenii material (culled predominantly from SubGenii zines) published by the corporate firm Simon and Schuster and information retrievable on the internet. Sadly, the same problems that characterize her study of Discordianism return here, in that the full range of the COSG's primary sources and the historical context in which they were disseminated, attacked, and revised are generally ignored.

The limitations of an approach exclusively based on religion as narrative become especially evident in this chapter, in that Cusack devotes page after page to untangling the Gordian Knot of the COSG mythos instead of analyzing the metaphysical assumption or heuristic utility which these myths serve. The COSG cannot be understood apart from its role in articulating the ontological anarchism sub-zeitgeist, which characterized the 'zine scene' and the Chaos Magick milieu that developed within it. Both official SubGe-

nii zines like ‘The Stark Fist of Removal’ and anti-SubGenii zines like ‘Crawl or Die’ make clear that the COSG represents an innovative development of Discordianism’s ontological anarchism. Cusack does repeatedly mention the similarities between Discordianism and the COSG; however, without any historical information or material from the zine scene, she is unable to state succinctly how they are contextually connected, or, more importantly, identify their place in the larger history of 20th century religion. Again, the lacuna in Cusack’s scholarship justifies a few words of explication. The COSG was instantly popular when it debuted in the zine scene in the late 1970s, and succeeded in attracting the primary architects of Discordianism (Kerry Thornley and Robert Anton Wilson) to its cause; that said, the latter has differentiated itself from the former in two important ways. Whereas Discordianism is highly individualistic and premised on widening consciousness, the COSG functions as a coalition and is dedicated to the realization of the mutual aspirations of its devotees. Their differing agendas are illustrated in the expressions they use to mark their respective ‘gnostic’ breakthroughs. Discordians exclaim, “I have seen the Fnords!,” signaling their ability to comprehend the hidden mechanisms that control reality, whereas SubGenii claim the attainment of ‘slack,’ which is unalienated activity.

While Cusack defines slack as a mix between Buddhist notions of enlightenment (87) and culture jamming (95), slack can in fact be anything from orgiastic parties to playing music. Most significantly though, slack is the ideal that is achieved when a SubGenius can leave conventional modes of employment behind and live off the profits made through their promotion of the Church via zines, amateur films, and bacchanalian events. Therefore, Cusack’s meticulous detailing of the mythos included in the edited anthologies misses its true significance because the mythos exists not to be revered, but rather to be expanded, revised, and in all manners manipulated for profit so that SubGenii need not work conventional jobs. Space constraints prevent detailing how an anti-work philosophy was converted into the spiritual ideal of slack in the 1980s zine scene, thus it must suffice to mention that the ‘abolition of work’ philosophy was first articulated by the once prominent SubGenius and anarchist luminary, Bob Black, in the zine scene.

The final chapter, “Third-Millennium Invented Religions,” reads as though it was intended as a stand-alone piece, partly due to the fact that the religions it analyzes (Jediism, Matrixism, and The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster) are decades younger than the other three. The chapter opens with a renewed focus on theoretical issues concerning religions based on popular culture. Cusack is at her most insightful here, especially in re-

gards to clarifying the dynamics that undergird the discursive transfers between science fiction and new religions. As is the case with the other religions, however, the lived experience of members of Jediism and Matrixism are hardly explained. This could be due to a number of factors, but chief among them seems to be Cusack's investment in narrative as the basis of religion, which predisposes her to attempt to justify the study of religions that openly announce their constructed status, at the expense of providing a more comprehensive assessment of them as religious systems. Another possible reason for the lack of information on the lived experience of these religions is that the sheer disparity between the religious practices and worldviews may have undermined the typological similarity they supposedly possess. The inclusion of The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster (COFSM) in her 'invented religions' typology is exemplarily in this regard. As an explicit critique of Creationism, the COFSM is closer to a ludic form of atheism than the other religions being analyzed. The COFSM has no need for any of the legitimization strategies the other religions employed as it has no pretensions concerning the veracity of its theological claims, nor does it oblige its adherents to adopt an ontology that would necessitate such strategies; yet, according to Cusack, it is typologically identical to religions like Discordianism, which has an elaborate means of reconciling its fictitious components with its ontology. Essentially, this indicates that the integration of explicitly fictional elements into broader religious narratives is not a substantial enough characteristic to build a typology upon.

Cusack's research on the six religions under scrutiny in *Invented Religions* represents a major contribution to their legitimization as worthy objects of research. However, in basing her typology on a single narrative feature and neglecting primary source research, the category of 'invented religions' lets apparent similitude take precedent over the actual character of the religions studied. In addition to being somewhat arbitrary, typological approaches like Cusack's offer little in terms of explanation in cases where the metaphysical commitments of a religion refashion the function of conventional narrative forms (like fiction) in unconventional ways as part of larger, idiosyncratic worldviews. Ultimately, *Invented Religions* provides a solid introduction to an array of unconventional and previously neglected religious movements; yet, its typological approach fails where careful history will undoubtedly succeed, that is to say, in elucidating the idiosyncratic dynamics of contemporary religiosity.

J. Christian Greer