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**Book review of Carole M. Cusack, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith* (2010)**

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## Book Reviews

Carole M. Cusack, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. vii + 179.

In *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith*, Carole M. Cusack discusses six movements that inhabit the border area between religion and popular culture. These are Discordianism (founded 1957), The Church of All Worlds (founded 1962), and The Church of the SubGenius (founded 1979); as well as Jediism, Matrixism and The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, which have all three been founded in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. All six (predominantly American) movements are categorised as “invented religions.” The term ‘invented religion’ does here not refer to any religion that in empirical terms is the result of human inventiveness (since such a category would include all religions), but in the narrow sense of religions which explicitly “announce their invented status” (p.1).

The first chapter of the book, entitled ‘The Contemporary Context of Invented Religions’, provides a theoretical introduction. Cusack presents an excellent overview of the sociological conditions of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and persuasively connects the emergence of invented religions with cultural changes such as secularisation (understood as religious change rather than decline), individualisation, and the rise of popular culture, especially science fiction, as a source of meaning.

The main part of the book is comprised of three chapters on invented religions from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Most important are the chapters on Discordianism and The Church of the SubGenius, which have so far received little academic attention despite their age, size (there are presumed to be about ten thousand SubGenii), and broad influence in the alternative underground. Cusack shows how both groups employ science fiction, conspiracy theories, beat-inspired Zen, environmental awareness, anti-consumerism, anarchism, and a very large portion of absurd and satirical humour. The founders of Discordianism and The Church of the SubGenius have both published zine style, ironical ‘scripture’ with titles such as *Principia Discordia* and *Revelation X: The ‘Bob’ Apocryphon* in which their cosmology is explained. Cusack deserves praise for presenting this material in an academic way which nevertheless allows the reader great fun. It is hilarious to read, for instance, that the SubGenii postulate to descend from the Yetis, follow the fictional, pipe smoking prophet J. R. ‘Bob’ Dobbs who has received “communionications” from Jehovah-1, and devote special holidays to St Monty Python and St

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Cthulhu. It is clear that these two movements explicitly announce their invented status.

The inventedness of The Church of All Worlds lies in the movement's original inspiration from Robert Heinlein's science fiction novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961). The Church's name and a part of its rituals and terminology are still based on Heinlein's book. Quite early in the movement's history, The Church of All Worlds adopted elements from Wicca, began to identify as 'Neo-Pagan', and became an important rally point for the American Neo-Pagan movement through its publication of the *Green Egg* magazine. Cusack also briefly discusses three invented religions from the twenty-first century: Jediism, which is based on George Lucas' *Star Wars* movies; Matrixism, which builds on the Wachowsky brothers' *Matrix* trilogy (and Bahá'í); and Bobby Henderson's parody on the Intelligent Design movement, The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster.

One of the book's strengths is Cusack's detailed documentation of the founding and early history of the three early movements. She shows how the leaders gradually came to believe that the movement, which they initially founded as a joke, contained more value and truth than they first thought. On the other hand, little space is used to discuss the newer history of the movements, and the book focuses generally on the leaders rather than on the followers. It is mentioned that Discordianism, The Church of the SubGenius, and The Church of All Worlds still exist and that the two first have profited greatly from the internet and experience continued growth. Despite this, we do not hear what membership of these organisations mean for average followers. That is, what they think and do and why they are members.

The main point of the book is to argue that, even though the movements under treatment belong to the category 'invented religions', they cannot be denigrated as fakes or parody religions, but must be treated as real religions (p. 20). Cusack does not explicitly define religion, but it is clear that religion for her has to do with narratives that fascinate because invisible agents act in the world (pp. 4, 139). Indeed, all six movements hold ideas about trans-empirical beings or powers who possess strategic knowledge, agency, and purpose. That the ideas are not always seriously meant does not matter for Cusack. She explicitly distances herself from a notion of religion that operates with belief as classification criterion, an approach she views as Christo-centric (p. 46).

In Cusack's account of the individual groups, it becomes clear that none of them are fakes with regard to sociality (they are organised, meet at conventions), and values (for example, moderate anarchism and environmentalism). But is that really enough to be a religion? Is it sound to regard an organisation that structurally *fakes* its postulates about trans-empirical agent as a religion? Cusack's answer is 'yes', but the problem is not

systematically discussed. That is remarkable since the individual descriptions of the groups reveal huge differences in outlook. In three of the treated movements (Discordianism, The Church of the SubGenius and The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster), the postulates about supernatural agents are openly satirical. The followers of these movements do not believe in the empirical existence of Eris, 'Bob' and the Flying Spaghetti Monster. In other words: they do not ontologise the narrative world. In my opinion, these groups have greater affinity with fan cultures than with religions; without this meaning they should be taken less seriously by scholars. The outlook is entirely different in the other three movements (The Church of All Worlds, Jediism and Matrixism) where people seriously postulate the ontological existence of, for instance, the Goddess and the Force. In these movements, many members have great troubles with their groups' fictional roots and consequently devise classical legitimisation strategies in order to inscribe their beliefs in a larger non-fictional tradition (Paganism, Buddhism, Bahá'í). As far as I can see, these movements can not be categorised as invented religions if that category is defined by explicit announcement of the invented character of one's belief postulates. Rather, these three movements are simply new religions.

One can agree or disagree with the usefulness of Cusack's category 'invented religions', but the fact that the book provokes the reader to reflect on the very category of religion is certainly one of its greatest strengths. In sum, *Invented Religions* is both an important contribution to the empirical study of the fuzzy border between religion and popular culture and an invitation for scholars to further theorise that border.

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