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Review

Carole M. Cusack and Pavol Kosnáč (eds.)

Fiction, Invention and Hyper-reality: From Popular Culture to Religion

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Edited by the widely-published Carole M. Cusack, Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Sydney, and independent scholar Pavol Kosnáč of Bratislava, Slovakia, *Fiction, Invention and Hyper-reality: From Popular Culture to Religion* rests at the cutting-edge of the fields of Religious Studies and the Sociology of Religion; hence its inclusion in Routledge's Inform series on minority religions and spiritual movements, edited by Eileen Barker. True to the series, *Fiction, Invention and Hyper-reality* is attractive to both an academic and an interested general audience.

The emergent subject area addressed within *Fiction, Invention and Hyper-reality* encompasses contested contemporary religions that are based on fictional texts and those that include fictional texts in their canon of scriptures or inspirational phenomena (p. 1). In their introduction, Cusack and Kosnáč place the study of 'fictional', 'invented', and 'hyper-real' religions closest to the study of new religious movements within Religious Studies. The three labels are derived from the scholarship of Markus Altena Davidson, Carole M. Cusack, and Adam Possamai, respectively (p. 2). Due to the controversies within the field, such as potential misunderstandings by traditionally religious people, differing definitions among scholars, and the oft-perceived oxymoronic juxtaposition of religion and popular culture, Cusack and Kosnáč suggest that applying social scientific methodologies can aid in common rationalisation. However, they admit the various methodologies used within the field, as well as the wide net used for obtaining qualified subjects: both self-identified religious groups and non-self-identified, non-institutionalised religious and spiritual practices. Cusack and Kosnáč maintain the importance of studying such contested religions and spiritualities, claiming that

‘[t]he principle reason to study the phenomena of fiction-based, invented or hyper-real religions is the challenge that such study presents to the classical understanding of what religion is and what “holiness” and “religiosity” look like’ (p. 3).

Following through on such a claim, *Fiction, Invention and Hyper-reality* includes four parts; each set on exploring and expanding the boundaries of ‘religion’. The first part, ‘Tolkien’s Legendarium, the Elven lineage and the Internet’, is perhaps the most diverse of the four. It brings together groups that use the internet as a space for initial encounter and continued interaction—whether social or ritualistic—with other group members. Markus Altena Davidsen provides an account, along with ‘insider’ accounts as appendices, of two Tolkien-based spiritual traditions. Carole M. Cusack discusses the contemporary narrative of the self as expressed in the Otherkin (people who believe and live as if they are partly other-than-human) and Therianthropy (distinguished from the Otherkin by their other selves being animal) communities, primarily existing online. Venetia Laura Delano Robertson compares the written religious narratives of women from medieval Christendom and modern fandom with the intention of studying how women have confronted patriarchal norms and articulated a sense of sacred selfhood. Robertson’s case studies include Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, Mrs Sephiroth, and Sephirothslave; the latter two recorded their Soulbond with the *Final Fantasy* villain, Sephiroth, via online journals, blogs, and discussion pages. Finally, Pavol Kosnáč explains the Brony fandom, including the attractiveness of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* following initial encounters with the show via fan-made content, such as internet memes.

The second part, ‘Film and television as sacred texts’, is composed of five chapters and includes two of the first complete ‘insider’ chapters: that of Jediism (by Ash Williams, Benjamin-Alexandre Miller, and Michael Kitchen) and that of Dudeism (by the Dudely Lama, Oliver Benjamin). This part also includes: a chapter on anime spirituality and an anime-based religion by Katherine Buljan, an observational account of Jediism within Second Life by Helen Farley (pictures included!), and Marcus Free’s study of the spiritual symbolism surrounding former football player Diego Maradona as portrayed in cinematic films.

Part Three, ‘Online mediation of invented, fiction-based and hyper-real religions’, differs from Part One in the greater necessity of the online environment for the religious or spiritual groups included. J. Christian Greer’s chapter on Discordianism focuses on the religion’s more recent institutionalisation. David G. Robertson interrogates the relationship between satirising religion and taking religion seriously, using the Church of the SubGenius as his case study. The tensions between legitimatisation and anti-state digital activism within Kopimism are analysed by Danielle L. Kirby and Elisha H. McIntyre. The final chapter of this section is another ‘insider’ account, this time by sociologist William Sims Bainbridge concerning the virtual revival of a deceased family member by means of online role-playing games.

The concluding part of *Fiction, Invention and Hyper-reality*, ‘Countercultural personal spiritualities and religions’, presents a discussion of the sacred arenas created by Sun Ra’s Arkestra performances by Johanna J. M. Petsche; an ‘insider’ account of the

developments, evolution and continuing artistic and cultural contribution of the Church of All Worlds by Primate Oberon Zell; and Adam Possamai's and Vladislav Iouchkov's analysis of the Real-Life Superhero movement.

In Cusack's and Kosnáč's introduction, they claim that each chapter does three things: first, they study beliefs and practices that are based on popular culture yet can be described as religious or spiritual; second, they claim that these beliefs and practices affect participants in real life (p. 3); and third, each chapter touches upon the problem of authenticity and legitimacy (p. 11). The third commonality remains the most important within this edited volume, especially given the controversies surrounding invented, fictional, and hyper-real religions. Such questions of authenticity and legitimacy are perhaps more adroitly addressed in chapters written by scholars; however, the 'insider' chapters are more clearly able to provide an account of the motivations and desires of individuals within the religious/spiritual groups discussed therein. Taken as a complete whole, *Fiction, Invention and Hyper-reality* leaves the reader with the impression that perceived authority over belief, life-style, and ethics is shifting away from the institutionalised, traditional, ancient world religions. Such an impression is successfully imparted to the reader through a simultaneously entertaining and informational book. The interwoven voices of practitioners and scholars provide a wide scope from which to view this budding field—with its comingling of popular culture and the sacred, from the abiding coolness of Dudeism to the digital activism of Kopimism. *Fiction, Invention and Hyper-reality* is a valuable addition to the bookshelf of the religious scholar, as well as for the general reader interested in the sociology of religion.