

Invented religions: this fiction is so good it should be true!

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Abstract:

Utilizing contemporary scholarship on secularization, individualism, and consumer capitalism, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith* by Carole Cusack analyses six new religions created from 1957 to 2005: Discordianism, The Church of All Worlds, The Church of the SubGenius, Jediism, Matrixism, and the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. In many ways, it is an original and enjoyable work that sheds light on the richly imagined worlds of six invented religions that most people know little about. This interdisciplinary book introduces the concept of 'invented religions', questions religious legitimacy, and discusses religious creativity, its relations to humour and story-telling. Despite being culturally viable and popular, scholars investigating religious phenomena have long dismissed these groups as jokes, since they don't fit the well-established typologies. Cusack's empirical exploration of creative bricolage seeks to broaden the understanding of religion and argues for the right of invented religions to be taken seriously as significant (counter)cultural innovators formulating influential narratives about the nature of reality.

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The expertise of the author Carole Mary Cusack (Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Sydney) in both Religious Studies and English Literature enables her to outline the connections between old and new literary and religious narratives with ease and relate them reliably and enjoyably to contemporary societal processes. Echoing the message of the inherent importance of narratives to humans, Cusack suggests that humans yearn for narratives infused with meaning (p. 140). She sees these movements as a testimony to the power of narrative which struck a chord with generations that had lost faith in the Christian narrative and were looking for a new story. Cusack finds it ultimately unimportant if these stories are fictional (p. 82) because many of the founders did not mean to create serious religions. Rather they discovered after a while that it practically worked for them and many others, thus functioning as self-fulfilling prophecies. She concludes that the time has come to extend the acceptance to invented religions, stating that if they are meaningful to their members, they are real religions despite being invented (p. 149).

The volume is organized into five chapters with an introduction and conclusion. The six movements are presented in chronological order of their inception. However, the depth of analysis dedicated to the genesis and status quo of each case study differs significantly. The bulk of the book deals with Discordianism (founded in 1957), The Church of All Worlds (founded in 1962), and The Church of the SubGenius (founded in 1979), while the third millennial invented religions Jediism (founded in 2001), Matrixism (2004) and The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster (2005) are stuffed into a single chapter.

The first chapter explores the contemporary religious context and introduces the novel concept 'invented religions'. Invented religions are new religious movements that deliberately cannibalize elements of popular culture and openly admit being invented from a mixture of science fiction, ancient and current mythology, and contemporary consumer culture. As they don't use the traditional legitimizing tools, like tracing their origins to divine revelation or to holy books or a distant past, they have been largely ignored as fakes by academia (p.1). Cusack proposes broadening the understanding of religion, asserting that invented religions are an inevitable outcome of a society addicted to the consumption of novelties (p. 18). Furthermore her understanding refers to a view of human nature according to which it has an evolutionary biological bias towards developing certain kinds of explanatory narratives (p. 21). Advocating

for the functional equality of the invented and the so-called 'real' religions is one of the main aims of her book.

The second chapter introduces Discordianism, a religion devoted to Eris, the Greek goddess of chaos. Inspired by Ayn Rand, Beat Zen, Greek mythology, and conspiracy theories, it began as a creative joke, but developed into experienced presence of Eris by the 1970s (p. 51). Chapter three discusses the Church of All Worlds (CAW), which has a more explicit relationship to fiction, being founded on the basis of Robert A. Heinlein's novel *Strangers in a Strange Land* (1961) and later founding the Grey School of Wizardry, based on Hogwarts from J.K. Rowling's Potter series. This testifies to their creative attitude, according to which "if there is a fiction that is so good that it ought to exist, humans have a duty to make that fiction a reality" (p. 74). Chapter four looks at the story of the Church of the SubGenius (COSG), often deemed a parody religion with no conceivable spiritual merit (p. 108). Cusack argues that its comical emphasis on riches, luck, and sexual attractiveness is a witty 'culture jam' on religions that emphasize material success like Scientology, and its ultimate aim is spiritual (p. 84). All three groups seek to achieve the disenchantment of the 'homo consumericus' from the conformed perception of reality, which they see as intellectually bankrupt, and bring about guerilla enlightenment (p. 93-4, 110).

Chapter five provides a brief overview of the third millennial invented religions Jediism (inspired by George Lucas' Star Wars films), Matrixism (originating from the Wachowski brothers' Matrix trilogy), and the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, which started as a protest against teaching Intelligent Design in schools. Despite their differences, all six movements represent the contemporary trend of 'religion a la carte', where individual combinations of religious elements are preferred over the 'set menus' offered by traditional religious institutions (p. 129).

One of the most interesting points in the analysis is that these new narratives are characterized by being practice-oriented and making no distinction between sacred and profane (p. 72, 81). Their role is rather the Promethean provision of knowledge and skills than any revelation of a path to salvation through faith.

Perhaps the biggest shortcoming of the book is its occasional unevenness. It presents the three main case studies in detail, but touches on the latter three only sketchily. Furthermore, it neither gives voice to adherents – aside from the founders – nor provides information about the number of followers. Thus it is difficult to assert if the labeling as religion is justified in all cases. It remains to be seen if these movements will last or falter, or if they merit the status of a religion, but in any case their influence over the last 55 years deserves thorough analysis.

This book provides a comprehensive overview and initial comparative analysis of three mid-20th century invented religions, offers a glimpse of three newer movements, and provides valuable resources for further analysis. In this respect it fulfills its purpose to prompt a more

detailed academic conversation about invented religions (p. 149). Sociologically solidly grounded and fun to read, unbound by disciplinary borders and relatively jargon-free, it is suitable for a broad readership interested in popular culture and religion, social movements, and science fiction as well as cultural, literary or narrative studies.