

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 21st 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-20th 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 “communications” from Jehovah-1, and devote special holidays to St Monty Python and St

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.

Markus Davidsen
Aarhus University and Leiden University

Barry Spurr, *'Anglo-Catholic in Religion': T. S. Eliot and Christianity* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2010), pp. 340.

Barry Spurr's book is an examination of the religion of the celebrated Modernist poet Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965), advancing the thesis that his devotional life was not merely Anglican, but Anglo-Catholic, in its specific beliefs and practices. In the 'Preface' to *For Lancelot Andrewes* (1928), Eliot identified himself as a "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion" (p. vii). Spurr aims to fill a gap in knowledge, because although many scholars refer to Eliot's Christianity, none "has revealed an

informed understanding of Anglo-Catholicism in general” (p. ix). Chapter One considers Eliot’s American background, and the New England Unitarian religious orientation of his family. Eliot was later to reject the ecumenical and liberal nature of this religion, and to discover in orthodox Christianity and the doctrine of Original Sin, something that staunchly opposed emotional Romanticism, of which he was suspicious.

Eliot was educated at Milton Academy and at Harvard where he studied philosophy and Eastern languages, which exposed him to Buddhist thought. In October 1914 he went up to Oxford, though his doctorate was completed at Harvard. Chapter Two is a sketch of his preliminary journey towards Anglo-Catholicism, and begins in 1917. Spurr notes that Eliot was first exposed to ritual in religion by attending Mass with his Irish Catholic nurse Annie Dunne, and also draws attention to his partiality for certain City churches in London, most notably St Mary Woolnoth and St Magnus the Martyr. Chapter Three considers Eliot’s relationship with Vivienne Haigh-Wood, whom he married in 1915. Spurr argues that the peculiar unhappiness that the couple developed was itself an important contribution to Eliot’s religious journey, and offers an even-handed account of the friendship the couple had with Bertrand Russell (who was very likely Vivienne’s lover for a period).

Chapter Four details the situation of English Anglo-Catholicism between the wars. This includes aspects of social history and literary assessments of Anglo-Catholic clergy (for example, Rose Macauley’s 1956 *The Towers of Trebizond* and Evelyn Waugh’s 1945 *Brideshead Revisited*). Spurr is frank about the act that Anglo-Catholicism was regarded as unmanly, and he explains carefully the homosocial and homoerotic nature of the associations of Anglo-Catholic clergy and devout laymen. This chapter also considers the hostility of mainstream Anglicanism to Anglo-Catholics (particularly to the reserving of the Blessed Sacrament, the sacrament of confession, and monastic communities such as Nashdom Abbey, which Eliot later found deeply appealing). He also provides sketches of Anglo-Catholic clergy such as Bishop Frank Weston of Zanzibar and T. S. Eliot’s parish priest at St Stephen’s, Gloucester Road (South Kensington) Father Eric Cheetham.

Chapter Five commences with Eliot’s baptism into the Church of England in 1927. He became a communicant at St Stephen’s in 1933, and shared the Anglo-Catholic devotion to the executed King Charles I, becoming a member of the Society of King Charles the Martyr (though the deposed king was never officially canonised). This chapter contains detailed discussion of the liturgy, explaining how ceremonies such as High Mass and the sacrament of penance, and religious observances such as prayer and devotion to the Virgin Mary, were part of Eliot’s religious life as an Anglo-Catholic. Chapter Six, ‘A Christian State’, examines Eliot’s activism with regard to social issues,

which was expressed through the publication of articles in periodicals such as 'The Listener'. This led to his major writings on the subject, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939) and *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948). The final chapter argues for Eliot's Anglo-Catholic identity in terms of his literary output, focusing on 'Ash Wednesday' (1930), often interpreted as his conversion poem, 'The Rock' (1934), a play that is not often highly regarded but which contains excellent elements, and with some consideration of the 'Four Quartets' (1936-1942), which Eliot regarded as his major poetic statement, and which cannot be understood without reference to Christian thought.

Barry Spurr has written a work of major importance in the understanding of T. S. Eliot, a work which does much to enrich the reader's understanding of the poet's social, political and spiritual context, and which succeeds superbly in establishing the distinct nature of Anglo-Catholicism (distinguishable from both Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism), a little-understood religious position, which English people regarded as the legitimate Catholic Church in England. This book is recommended to scholars of Eliot and those interested in twentieth century Christian trends. It should find a welcome reception in all good libraries, and among interested readers from undergraduate and postgraduate students to interested members of the community.

Carole M. Cusack
University of Sydney