

Handbook of Hyper-real Religions, edited by Adam Possamai. Brill, 2012, 441pp., \$196, ISBN-13: 9789004218819.

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The question “how might religion and popular culture relate” is a common one in the study of media and religion, but it is a question that assumes a hard binary between two essentials: “religion” and “popular culture.” It is also a question of limited use when confronted with a series of case studies that seem to necessarily demand an analytical approach attentive to hybridity, co-production, and negotiation. Consider, for example, the adoption of self-identified secular entertainment (like the *Star Wars* or *Matrix* films) by new religions who assert that these works accomplish “real religious work,” either metaphorically or as actual manifestations of the sacred (i.e. The Jedi Church and Matrixism). Other movements, like the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster and The Missionary Church of Kopimism, mobilize popular culture and religious discourse as part of their efforts to satirize contemporary Western legal privileges given to certain religious movements and never secular ones. An increased awareness of the interplay between capitalism, popular culture, religion, materiality, and globalization has produced new lines of inquiry which attempt to think through religion and popular culture via issues of ownership, intention, sincerity, strategy, and politics as each relates to new articulations of religion-as-entangled-with media structures.

Published in 2012, *The Handbook of Hyper-Real Religions (HHRR)* represents one of the first instances of sustained conversation amongst scholars of New Religious Movements (NRMs) on the issues detailed above. Edited by Adam Possamai with contributions by Danielle Kirby, Kamaludeen Nasir, Lauren Bernauer, and Joseph Laycock (among others), the volume is an attempt to theorize popular culture and religion with special attention to matters of religious and spiritual authority, reception, and meaning-making in these contemporary religious practices. While the handbook deals with case studies as diverse as the Otherkin, Vampires, and evangelical responses to table top role playing games, in her preface Eileen Barker situates the project as cohesively informed by the particular contexts of NRM studies and a

growing awareness of diffuse spiritualities that belie traditional categories of religion (ix).

While there are certainly chapters that deviate, as a whole *HHRR* adopts a conservative and essentialist approach as it preserves a clear distinction between religion and popular culture by promoting a third category: “hyper-real religions.” Barker tells us that in this volume the concept of hyper-real religions has been applied to an analyses of “*homo religious*” as s/he lives in the world today, arguing that analyzing the boundaries of what “might usefully (if somewhat controversially) counts as religious or spiritual beliefs or practices” is productive to scholarly understanding of the ways in which humans use mundane resources towards transcendent ends (x). It is here also that Barker admits the ambiguity of the volume, asking if the seemingly arbitrary divide between secular popular culture and religious resource remains too messy as it is currently theorized amongst the chapters (x).

While Jean Baudrillard’s concept of the hyper-real gives this conceptual paradigm its name, the motivating germ of the volume is actually sociologist Adam Possamai’s reinterpretation of Baudrillard. Specifically, Possamai defines “hyper-real religions” as the various movements of religion to mobilize popular culture as a central meaning-making resource, arguing that hyper-real religions can be defined as a “simulacrum of religion created out of, or in symbiosis with, commoditized popular culture which provides inspiration at a metaphorical level and/or a source of beliefs for everyday life” (31). Central to the movement of hyper-real religion is its ability to use popularly “profane” imagery, language, and resources in order to both “[discover and create] sacred space in cyberspace” (x).

Possamai identifies three main articulations of hyper-religion through a typology of consumption: 1) *active* hyper-real religions are characterized by the active consumption of popular culture that has led to the creation of “new types of spiritualities” (like the Church of the Jedi), 2) *casual* hyper-real religion blends casual consumption of popular culture into pre-established religions (so that Christian role players blend elements of *Dungeons and Dragons* into their spiritual development as subjects while retaining the distinction between the two sets of resources), and 3) fundamentalists who oppose the consumption of popular culture and fortify the separation between the secular and the religious (3–10).

In the only other chapter in the volume that deals with the theory of hyper-real religions without centering on a particular case study, Martin Geoffrey’s “Hyper-real Religion Performing in Baudrillard’s Integral Reality” argues that Possamai is reinterpreting, rather than readapting or extending,

Baudrillard's original thesis. Geoffroy is most uncomfortable with Possamai's implicit extension of the negative bias with which Baudrillard wrote about hyper-reality and the consequence of extending that negativity to a classification scheme of new religions. Geoffroy suggests his own thesis that these movements might be better identified as "integral religions," or performance religions of networked individuals who communicate through an interface especially about questions of ultimate meaning (28–31).

Douglas E. Cowan's contribution provides a particularly useful way to think about the ways in which material and commodity culture relate more generally to NRMs. Cowan theorizes the use of a set of Lovecraft-inspired Tarot cards belonging to a small neo-pagan community to argue that hyper-reality is a *process* of systematizing, materializing, and commercializing doctrine and practice rather than a gesture to a state or category of being (260). Through the processes of hyper-reality, Cowan argues, the founder of the group ("Tyson") established authorial control over the community by dogmatizing his own interpretation of Lovecraft lore via the material culture of the group's books and divinatory tools. The system of interpretation Tyson has built around the tarot cards effectively removes Lovecraft from the realm of fiction and "places them in the context of real behavior and consequence," allowing the group to treat Lovecraft's characters as "real entities" (261). Cowan ultimately concludes that Tyson can be used to illustrate another *type* of hyper-reality, different from that of Possamai while equally applicable to the study of religion online. Hyper-reality here, Cowan argues, is not about the processes of religious innovation from popular culture, but about the blending of reality so that "pop culture *becomes* religious culture" (262).

Alternatively, Danielle Kirby argues that the approach taken by the hyper-real framework treats hyper-real participants as static consumers of popular culture and misses the ways in which these individuals are constantly involved in processes of negotiation with their chosen religious texts. Using Discordia, the Church of the SubGenius, and the Temple of Psychic Youth as her case studies, Kirby emphasizes a process of "remixture" by which these groups prioritize the movement and form of their religious text rather than just the content. Far from seeing religious textual materials as closed, static documents that are given once by divine revelation in their perfected form, Kirby argues that these movements centralize practices of communal editing and play with religious source materials (55–56).

In "Science Fiction Religions" Benjamin E. Zeller combines the pragmatism of William James with Possamai's interpretation of Baudrillard to argue that Heaven's Gate can be categorized both as a science fiction and a

hyper-real religion. Zeller argues that the adoption of a hyper-real lens allows scholars to take these fictive elements of a religion “seriously” by seeing what these elements “do” and how they work. Debbie McCormick’s “The Sanctification of *Star Wars: From Fans to Followers*” emphasizes the ways in which digital technologies have opened space for geographically disperse new religious movements, providing a community forum and spaces for progressive decision making in the absence of an immediately apparent authoritative structure. McCormick imagines hyper-real religions as especially characterized by acephalous organization structures that negotiate consumption and production through new media technologies. Members of hyper-real religions, McCormick argues, can be best understood as ‘prosumers’ or “public producer-consumers” (181).

Overall *HHRR* is a useful collection of essays for students of media and religion who may want to spend time mapping how one particular concept (in this case the hyper-real) is continually renegotiated through use, extension, and pushback. The volume as a whole tends to place case studies very centrally, so *HHRR* is also useful for scholars wanting to become acquainted with the broad field of NRMs and popular culture. However, the narrow formation of the hyper-real means that this volume will likely find more favor with sociologists than anyone else. Finally, the common (though by no means homogenous) reinforcement of religion as a *sui generis* category amongst the chapters means that many of them fail to adequately move beyond the traditional binaries of religion and media / popular culture.