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Reviewed by Alex Norman, University of Sydney, alex.norman@sydney.edu.au

As an early-career scholar I find myself still amazed at the amount of scholarship missing from the annals of the academy. I remember well my undergraduate days thinking sadly that all that was interesting in the world had already been studied. How wrong I was! It was largely through the study of new religious phenomena that I learned that, in fact, the academy barely managed to scrape the surface of the human experience, and that, contrary to popular belief, religions are always new, in a Weberian sense. Volumes such as this, by Cosgrove et al, reinforce not just the importance of taking a scholarly interest in new religious formations, but in demanding that religious phenomena be continually approached as new.

While maintaining a front as a religious monolith, those of us exposed to Ireland’s diaspora find it surprising that scholarship on Irish NRMs has been lacking. In countries like Australia, the prominence of “pre-Christian” religious revival movements can lull one into thinking that Ireland is a hotbed of new religious thought, and study thereof. Not so, it seems, as the editors report that the hegemonic Christianity of Irish society has resulted in the study of “religion” in Ireland being understood as the study of the Churches of Ireland; “decidedly insular and determinedly institutional” (2). This volume is provocative, as a result, for as the editors note, such hegemony also entails the “systematic involvement of dominant religious institutions” (3) in the suppression of any forms of resistance, religious or otherwise. Perhaps it is apocryphal, but I recall hearing of the resistance faced by the organisers to the conference from which the chapters in the volume are drawn. In the face of such a parched scholarly environment, the editors do well to begin the book with a thorough “state of the art” (5), as they put it, of NRMs in Ireland and how the study of them should be approached. It is multi-disciplinary, inclusive, and rebellious in a satisfyingly critical and analytical manner.

The selection of chapters throughout the book evidences the new religious diversity of Ireland, however, the ‘newness’ of the field, in context, under-
standably results in some chapters that are not entirely satisfactory in their critical approach. Macourt’s chapter, for example, asks important questions about the ways in which Irish census data are gathered, but its first eighteen pages are a mess of statistics and rhetorical statements. It is then followed by a two page discussion which largely neglects many of the problems raised and fails to summarise further directions for research and scholarly consultation with government. Cosgrove’s chapter on minority religions and attitudes to globalisation deals with hard data better. She also demonstrates just how small and inaccessible many NRMs are in Ireland, and what an achievement it is to find just a single member (such as the single Raelian in her data).

The standout chapters of the book take the reader to the people being studied. I betray my ethnographic roots here, but I cannot help but think that any study of social phenomena must first look to people and to paint rich pictures of them prior to any scholarly discussion taking place. Butler’s chapter on Irish Neo-Paganism takes just this line, providing the reader with a well-informed description of the syncretistic dimensions of Irish neo-Paganism. Most importantly, it provides for the reader the voices of those being studied which helps to locate the character of the religious phenomena. Similarly, Mulholland’s chapter on Marian apparitions is filled with the sense of place and being that is characteristic of well executed ethnography (and travel writing for that matter). While at times taking what I find to be a slightly too casual approach to the analysis of the subject (one gets the sense that the author is writing about friends), what is important is the way Mulholland negotiates the complex forces at play in the social forces that give rise to the apparitions. The chapter also highlights the tenuous nature the critique of NRMs mounted by hegemonic religious institutions tends to have. Further, while the chapter misses it, Mulholland’s example also highlights how dominant reason has become as a moral force for such social formations.

Structurally the book is mostly satisfying, however, as one who is increasingly burdened with the task of editing I have two points that frustrate. Firstly, I find the use of a single bibliography at the end of the book quite annoying. Each chapter should be a standalone work with its own list of references to which the reader can refer. Placing them together at the end can make sense for page-saving reasons (I suppose), and to stop doubling up (where numerous authors refer to the same work), but I really do not see the point. Secondly, and similarly, the inclusion of abstracts at the start of each chapter seems doubly pointless. Not only have the contents of each chapter been summarised by the editors in the introduction, but the ‘introductions’ of most chapters which immediately follow the abstracts almost always repeat
what was just written. These, however, are minor points of criticism from one editor to another, as overall the book works well to communicate the vibrancy and currency of the study of new religious phenomena in Ireland.

I commend Cambridge Scholars for taking up the publication of this volume, and to the editors offer thanks for the wealth of information it provides. Indeed, I would argue that any sociology of religion in Ireland would now be incomplete without a close reading of this book; its contribution is significant.