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Materializing the Bible

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BIELO, James, *Materializing the Bible*. Digital project. <http://www.materializingthebible.com>.

Digital and social media are increasingly dominating our everyday lives. It should come as no surprise that this trend of digitalization is also affecting the ways in which people live and materialize their religious beliefs, and influencing how religious organizations mediate their messages to (prospective) audiences.

Research on the use of digital media for the spread of religious messages has already been done by various scholars. However, distributing scholarly insights on these trends in a digital way is an area that is still underdeveloped. The digital project *Materializing the Bible* by anthropologist James Bielo is a valuable contribution to the question of how scholars can share ethnographic and theoretical insights in a collaborative, digital manner. The project seems to be at the forefront of a new, engaging way to disseminate information, and to arrive at new insights on global religious practices.

Upon visiting the website *Materializing the Bible*, the first thing a visitor is confronted with is the following comment: “People do more than read Bibles. They use the written words to create material environments. *What happens when the Bible is materialized?*” This question is further explored on the website by Bielo and his collaborators, with a specific focus on three theoretical debates: the social life of things (in this case, biblical scripture), the anthropology of religious tourism and

pilgrimage, and material religion. In a recent article written for the journal *Religion*, Bielo (2018b) indicated his goal for the project to be comparable to the goals of the creators of biblical theme parks—to immerse visitors in narratives presented through different entertaining techniques. The approach developed for the digital project involves primary data gathered through fieldwork research, archival research on biblical parks, publicity materials obtained at different sites, and a variety of narrative descriptions.

The digital project, which was launched in July 2015, is related to other work done by Bielo in previous years, most prominently his ethnographic research on Ark Encounter, an evangelical theme park in Kentucky (Bielo 2018a). In this park, visitors are invited to step into a life-size replica of Noah’s ark and immerse themselves in life on the ark as it would have been thousands of years ago. In the book, Bielo clearly indicates how in the creation of the park two interrelated themes are foregrounded: the imperatives of modern entertainment, and the Christian problem of authenticity. The immersive element of entertainment takes center stage in the digital project as well.

According to guidelines of the American Academy of Religion (AAR), digital scholarship should aim to facilitate communication and exchange among scholars and to promote the public understanding of religion. *Materializing the Bible* for the most part meets this goal. As it is presented on the website, the project is an interesting attempt at

a collaborative endeavor on a subject that is both timely and historical.

The website consists of six ‘chapters’: a home, where the visitor is presented with the question mentioned above; a chapter on the background of the project; an interactive map; an overview of all the biblical attractions located in the world, divided into four sub-genres (re-creations, gardens, creationist sites, and Bible history museums); a listing of tours, in which primary data on different sites are presented; and a chapter entitled “Scholarship,” where teachers and scholars can find additional academic literature and discussion questions.

The “Map” section is especially insightful to understand the goal and scope of the project. In it, a Google map of the world is presented, dotted with green, red, blue, and yellow pointers (each color denoting a different sub-genre). These pointers indicate all the known places in the world where the Bible is in one way or another materialized. In an indirect way, it shows the global nature of Christianity. More information on these sites can be found in the section entitled “Tours.” Here, narrative descriptions of visits to different sites are presented, together with videos, photographs, and scans of brochures. The aim of these tours is to invite people to digitally visit the parks, to become immersed in the materialized Bible themselves.

This section relies heavily on collaborative research partners who travel to different sites around the world and comment on them. I have made a personal contribution to this section as well. When teaching a course on Christianity and popular culture, I visited one of the sites mentioned on the map with a group of students. Based on our visit, we wrote a narrative that is now part of the project. In this way, Bielo encourages other scholars to engage with the project and contribute to the assembly of first-hand data.

The obvious advantage of any digital project is its scope, regarding both intended audiences and collaborators. Being an online website, it can be visited by anyone interested

in the topic, and anyone can add to the insights by contacting Bielo. Perhaps the strength of the digital medium in this case is that it facilitates a plurality of audiences.

At the same time, this makes it unclear for whom the project was initially intended. While the ‘tours’ are written in a way that is engaging for all audiences imaginable, the discussion questions are designed for scholarly debates primarily happening in classrooms. The resources given also allude to an intended academic audience.

The digital project *Materializing the Bible* is a valuable addition to research in a field that is both immersive and engaging, and it seems to be a truly global phenomenon—one that is never-ending. While its topic of investigation is the question of how scripture is materialized, the project itself seems to struggle with how to digitally materialize research insights in a collaborative fashion. The website is an applaudable attempt and a definite step forward for the facilitation of cross-cultural research, but more initiatives could be undertaken to enhance the experience of immersion and collaboration. An easy option would be to include a discussion forum on the website, where visitors could share insights and respond to each other.

In its present state, the website feels too static to facilitate this feeling of immersion. It relies heavily on stationary text and non-moving pictures. Naturally, any website is static in nature: embodied immersion through all the senses is hard to re-create in a digital environment, in which the computer screen is (still) a literal boundary between the object of inquiry and the website visitor. However, more creative efforts could perhaps be included to meet the aim of giving visitors to the website a feeling of being immersed in the word and world of the Bible.

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CASSELBERRY, Judith, *The Labor of Faith: Gender and Power in Black Apostolic Pentecostalism*, 240 pp., notes, index. Durham, NC : Duke University Press, 2017. Paperback, \$25.95. ISBN 9780822369035.

The Labor of Faith is an excellent ethnography about the entanglements of gender ideology, authority, and religious labor in African-American Pentecostalism. It is the fruit of two and a half years of fieldwork at a New York branch of the Oneness Pentecostal denomination Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ (COOLJC). The writing is extremely fluid, setting a perfect balance between thick ethnographic description and conceptual debates with an interdisciplinary reach.

How should one consider female agency within a religious culture in which submission to male authority is theologically grounded and organizationally reflected in the exclusion of women from official leadership positions? This is Casselberry's main question, and, as an anthropologist of religion, I could not avoid stressing the resonances between her work and Saba Mahmood's influential *Politics of Piety*, which is cited. Analogously to Mahmood, Casselberry's "interest lies more in the circumstances of producing a holy Black female personhood within faith communities and less in the connections of the religious worlds of Black women to social, civic, and political activism" (p. 5). Both authors emphasize the irreducibility of gendered religious subject formation to the liberal grammar of compliance/resistance to patriarchy. Casselberry breaks new ground by displacing Mahmood's emphasis on individualized practices of self-care through a

broader focus on care for others or 'faith work,' the emotional, intimate, and aesthetic labor performed by COOLJC women within communities of practice marked by both hierarchy and interdependence.

Chapter 1 presents the faith work of 'church mothers' surrounding the sickness and death of a cherished member. By illustrating the protagonism of women in restoring an everyday life shattered by loss, it provides a rich ethnographic window into various kinds of religious labor, tackled in later chapters.

Chapter 2 narrates the history of COOLJC since its missionary origins in the Azusa Street Revival. This is a history of schism and continuity around the core issues of race, Oneness theology, and gender norms. It stresses the protagonism of pastors' wives despite an official church history that invisibilizes the work of 'helpmeets.' I found especially interesting how the ambiguities of theological distinctions between 'teaching' and 'preaching'—the first allowed for women, the latter prohibited—have become strategic for female leaders to exercise authority, not despite but within church norms.

Chapter 3 shows how the rank-and-file majority of women remain the economic and religious foundation of the church. It approaches COOLJC's ecclesiology as hosting a division of labor in which vertical official male leadership is construed over the vital background of women's horizontal operations. Such "politics of incomplete male domination" (p. 104) is presented through three female organizations whose faith work is characterized by a no title politics, rotating presiding offices, and multi-tasking, all of which prevent formal authority to 'stick' to specific members.

Chapter 4 examines the "emotion management skills" (p. 105) of COOLJC women as they work through gendered tensions inside and outside the church community, exploring the practical nuances of the church's patriarchal norms through scenes of deliberation, critique, and legitimate disobedience. A short but rich section about these women's

engagement with secular corporate culture explores how they set Christian righteousness and liberal meritocracy in critical dialogue, rather than divide their allegiance into private and public domains.

A noticeable effect of COOLJC's gendered division of labor is that it allows women to prioritize spiritual over administrative functions, and thus to lead "from the background" (p. 111). This is well exemplified in chapter 5, which deals with 'labor at the altar' or the intimate labor of leading recent converts into the institution and the Holy Spirit. Casselberry explores the gendered motif of mid-wifery that accompanies these religious skills, and the chapter provides an important corrective for the preacher-centered bias of the scholarship on Pentecostalism, which is often also a gender bias.

Chapter 6 analyzes the aesthetic labor of interconnecting the material and immaterial dimensions of Christianity, with a focus on dressing style and worship. Casselberry shows how COOLJC's dress code materializes theology but also mid-twentieth-century notions of black female 'respectability'. Similarly to other gendered norms examined in the book, there is a consensus that holiness entails proper dress, but there are also tensions surrounding how to implement it. Praise and worship—or yielding to the Holy Spirit through music and dance—are other modalities of aesthetic labor examined in the chapter. Women are shown to be the church community's main 'spiritual gatekeepers', embracing moments of charismatic fervor in which gendered hierarchies are often inverted through aesthetic labor. These moments are represented by Casselberry as glimpses into the ungendered subject of Christian eschatology, according to a temporality of 'already and not yet'.

The Labor of Faith provides great ethnographic insight into the complexities of non-liberal gender ideologies, and its discussion of 'faith work' opens a more communitarian avenue of inquiry into the problem of religious ethics and subject formation. The book

is highly recommended for scholars working in the fields of gender, religion, and race, and their intersections.

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CLARK, Emily Suzanne, *A Luminous Brotherhood: Afro-Creole Spiritualism in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans*, 280 pp., notes, index. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. Hardback, \$34.95. ISBN 9781469628783.

The nearly simultaneous publication of two monographs that explore New Orleans's Cercle Harmonique, an Afro-Creole Spiritualist society that held séances between 1858 and 1877, is as welcome as it is unanticipated. Although the scholarship on Spiritualism has grown considerably in the last two decades, its African-American dimensions remain understudied. Emily Clark's *A Luminous Brotherhood* (2016) and Melissa Daggett's *Spiritualism in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans* (2017) both draw from the rich René Grandjean Collection at the University of New Orleans and other French-language sources that illuminate the entwined religious and political pursuits of free Afro-Creole men at a time when they hoped that the sacrifices of the Civil War would yield greater equality. But the accounts differ in their approaches.

Clark concentrates on the spirit messages that Henry Louis Rey, a one-time state legislator and medium, recorded in more than 30 ledgers, mostly between 1871 and 1874. She shows that messages from deceased relatives and 'celebrity spirits'—such as John Brown, Abraham Lincoln, and a roster of heroes and martyrs of the French Revolution, the Mechanics' Institute Riot (1866), and the Battle of Liberty Place (1874)—encouraged Afro-Creoles to persevere in the struggle for self-determination as violence engulfed Reconstruction. For Clark, the Cercle Harmonique's séance table was a forum for airing

grievances and a space where mortals and spirits met to promote “the Idea”—a concept that meant humanitarian progress, equality, egalitarianism, brotherhood, and harmony” (p. 5). In contrast, Daggett’s (2017: xvi) biography of Rey aims “to look past the messages of the departed” to highlight the social and political troubles confronting black Creoles.

Clark’s account is indebted to Anne Braude, Brett Carroll, Robert Cox, and others who have linked Spiritualism to republicanism and social reform. But a determination to move beyond the national frame sets *A Luminous Brotherhood* apart. Clark zooms out from the society’s meeting room to the city of New Orleans, to the Catholic Church and the United States, and, finally, to the Atlantic world. She shows that Afro-Creoles located their demands for civil and political rights within a republican tradition that extended from France to Saint-Domingue, a colony whose revolution put the families of Cercle Harmonique members on the path to Cuba and New Orleans. Venturing away from the Northeastern strongholds of Spiritualism, Clark documents the influence of Catholicism on the Cercle in persuasive detail. The society’s mediums were in regular communication with the spirits of deceased clergymen despite their antipathy toward the Catholic Church, a sentiment that was rooted in the Church’s support for the Confederacy. Rey and his fellow Spiritualists especially prized messages from Saint Vincent de Paul, a figure known for his commitment to charity.

The widening field of view notwithstanding, Clark’s analysis is more focused on the traffic in ideas between France and New Orleans than intra-Caribbean flows. Clark observes that the Cercle undervalued the Spiritist doctrine of Frenchman Allan Kardec, declaring it a stepping-stone to Spiritualism (p. 164). But she does not remark on Kardec’s influence on the Spanish Caribbean and Brazil, where, in contrast to New Orleans, French doctrines proved enduring and protean enough to reshape and take on practices of African-inspired religions.

Instead, Clark characterizes Spiritualism as an American-made product of the “antebellum spiritual hothouse” (pp. 7, 15–16). Clark notes the influence of Vodou, Voodoo, and African-American churches, but concludes that Afro-Creole practices were defined by their enduring connection to Catholicism, imbrication in kinship relations, racialized identity vectors, and republican values.

The Cercle Harmonique challenged white supremacy and slaveholding, which the spirits likened to France’s ancien régime. Spirit messages celebrated egalitarianism, earned merits over aristocratic entitlements, and a Republican Party committed to black male suffrage. But Clark’s portrayal is well attuned to internal tensions. Some members of the Cercle hailed from slaveholding families. The spirits may have disavowed violence in the pursuit of moral progress, but the members of the Cercle clung to the hope that the Civil War would help to ‘regenerate’ the country. When it came to Saint-Domingue, the spirit of Alexander Pétion, the free man of color who became Haiti’s first president, held greater sway with the Cercle than the black generals who compromised on republicanism.

Clark acknowledges that Spiritualists were a minority among Afro-Creoles and shows that the Cercle Harmonique declined after Reconstruction. This may leave some readers wondering how to gauge the impact of Spiritualism in New Orleans. Clark demonstrates that a séance was neither a shelter from nor a substitute for political mobilization: ‘spiritual work’ was a form of political action in its own right. Afro-Creoles, Clark shows, deployed Spiritualism to “bring the French Revolution’s promises of universal liberty to their immediate environment” (p. 151).

A Luminous Brotherhood makes a significant contribution to the study of African-American religions and political thought in prose that will engage advanced undergraduates and specialists alike.

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COWAN, Douglas E., *America's Dark Theologian: The Religious Imagination of Stephen King*, 272 pp., notes, index. New York: NYU Press, 2018. Hardback, \$30.00. ISBN 9781479894734.

When people talk about the founders of what we might call original 'American' religions, one name is always omitted. This prophet is the author of what is perhaps the most successful American religion: a system of belief openly founded on not just one lie, but rather a whole fabric of intentional falsehoods. People do not discuss H. P. Lovecraft.

Lovecraft was an early-twentieth-century author and atheist who worked primarily in the genre of 'weird' fiction, the precursor to what is now referred to as 'horror'. Through his writings, and also through the writings of the many other genre fiction authors who built on the foundations Lovecraft laid down, the various alien gods and pitiless extra-dimensional beings that were recurring touchstones in his work congealed into an inhuman pantheon that is sometimes referred to as Lovecraft's mythos. That mythos has become something like the official fictional religion of fantasy, science fiction, and horror, a grab bag for writers in need of unthinkably vast, and unthinkably indifferent, eldritch entities. It is easy to see Lovecraft as creating a (faux) religion that answers the Copernican challenge to a degree that no other faith has, that embraces the creeping nihilism that can set in when one considers the breadth and depth of cosmic space and time. But despite this, Lovecraft is rarely seen as a *theological* figure. The difficulty could lie in Lovecraft himself, as his views on gender and race are toxically problematic. But we cannot see this moral disease as the only factor in Lovecraft's

theological rejection for one striking reason: his inheritors are equally ignored. Modern horror writers, those working in the genre that Lovecraft helped found, are not treated as religious thinkers no matter how many supernatural forces they use as plot devices.

Yet there is no need for this voluntary shackling of critical religious or theological thought, as shown by Douglas Cowan's *America's Dark Theologian: The Religious Imagination of Stephen King*. King is someone deeply influenced by Lovecraft. In addition to being a primary literary influence (as King states in his book-length essay on horror, *Danse Macabre*), Lovecraft is part of what might be called King's 'origin story'. King says that it was the discovery of an old paperback copy of Lovecraft's *The Lurking Fear and Other Stories* that first 'opened the way' for him to become a horror writer. But it is important for Cowan's book to note that although Stephen King may be influenced by H. P. Lovecraft, he is *not* H. P. Lovecraft. In some ways, choosing King makes Cowan's task less difficult, in that King does not have Lovecraft's racist baggage. King has not supersaturated the culture like Lovecraft has, but he has definitely supersaturated the publishing industry, having penned over 58 books, many of which have become bestsellers, movies, or both. While King has not been uniformly well received as a literary stylist, for Cowan this rejection makes King even more relevant. Cowan, who obviously does not share the distaste for King as a stylist, notes that if King were a hack, then the mystery of *why* he has been so successful becomes more compelling. If he cannot write, then what is it that draws people to him?

At least part of King's appeal, Cowan claims, is that his work asks the reader foundational questions. King's works "continually confront the answers we have been given about questions of ultimate meaning, questions we often think of as 'religious,'" Cowan says (p. xii). Cowan notes that King's fantastic horrors ask us as readers to suspend disbelief, an act that has been offered up as a definition of religion. King's works are also meditations

on death in its many different forms, meted out to people in numberless and often quite imaginative ways. These meditations on death also fit well with multiple accounts of the origin of religion.

Thus, Cowan reasons, King can be considered to be working in a theological key. Of course, this move can occur only if one wishes to expand the scope of what ‘theology’ is to encompass any sort of rumination about God or the Holy or the Divine. Expanding the definition of theology in this way could be controversial. But in the end, little of Cowan’s book hangs on this theological hook. All that is needed is a willingness to go along with the conceit that much of King’s work can be viewed as either exoteric or esoteric investigations of religion.

This turns out to be not that much of a stretch. It is easy to find Christian characters in King’s work (*Carrie*, *Needful Things*, *Salem’s Lot*), and even entire stories or novels built around Christian thematics (*The Stand*, “Children of the Corn”). And in at least one of King’s books, God Himself is a speaking character (*Desperation*). But for Cowan, this explicitly religious material is low-hanging fruit, and focusing solely on these texts ignores other more interesting possibilities. So Cowan also chooses to read ‘religiously’ many of King’s other works, seeing them as also asking religious questions. Examples abound. The alien spaceship buried in a Maine backyard (with King it is almost *always* Maine) in *The Tommyknockers* becomes an opportunity to perceive culture’s dependent relation on unseen, other-worldly orders. *Pet Sematary* becomes a reflection not only on life after death, but also on the structure of the ritual process. The car/dimensional portal that serves as the MacGuffin for *From a Buick 8* is King’s consideration of alterity and the ineffable. This is only a smattering of the religious philosophy that Cowan believes he can find in King’s work. Going through the entire King *oeuvre*, Cowan finds sufficient material to discuss religious socialization, forms of religious experience, theodicy, and a wealth of other issues.

Cowan’s book is readable and surprisingly accessible, even to those not familiar with King’s work. And while the book stays faithful to its King-centric task, as a text it can even serve as an introduction to the current state of religious studies—not a complete *précis*, of course, but still a tour of enough of the territory to get a sense of the discipline. However, there are some limitations. Despite Cowan’s obvious and admirable desire to expand the definition of religion beyond the conventional prejudices of the West, he is often forced by King’s material into framing religion in a recognizably Euro-American mode. And framing religion as being about ultimate questions means that even as Cowan brings our attention to religion as both a practice and a regulatory social institution, belief and cosmology end up playing an outsized role.

In the end, though, Cowan’s book stands or falls by its answers to two questions: first, if Stephen King is America’s ‘dark theologian,’ how clear is King’s theology, and, second, what (apart from its provenance) is ‘American’ about it? It turns out that these two questions are related. Cowan is careful to say that when it comes to religion, King questions but does not answer; yet the anti-institutional bent implicit in that act itself is a very American trait when it comes to faith. Much like America, King is suspicious of religion but drawn to the spiritual; is looking for moments of hope and redemption, even as he is weighed down by pessimism and a sense of gloom; is put off by the hypocrisy of the current social order, but is incredibly anxious about the forces of chaos outside that threaten to overrun that order.

All this is to say that King is a humanist, although one who fears for humanity’s future, and a moralist, even if he suspects that morality may mean little to the cosmos. These traits make King a good subject for Cowan’s exercise, and they are probably one of the reasons why King is capable of creating characters with some sort of psychological depth and plausibility. It is also no doubt part of the secret to King’s financial success. But it means that

King's religious thought, for all of its imaginative and horrific aspects, is a bit banal.

This is why, in the end, I felt compelled to open this review by discussing H. P. Lovecraft. Now, it is a book-reviewing crime to criticize an author for not having written the book that the reviewer would rather have had him write. But as I was reading Cowan's book, I found myself wondering what a theological articulation of Lovecraft would be like. It would not have to be Lovecraft *per se*; it could be any contemporary writer who thinks in the Lovecraftian vein of unvarnished cosmic pessimism, for example, Thomas Ligotti. But then, given Lovecraft's prominence, an investigation of Lovecraft could give us a sense of our current social-religious imaginary that rivals what Cowan sees as King's commentary on American faith.

If we are to take Cowan's work with King as a template for other projects to come, then this welcome first step opens the door for later theological reflections that truly go to heart of what horror hints at when chronicling humanity's blind wanderings through a truly uncaring and alien cosmos. Given the precarious state of our species, this may be the theology we need most of all.

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DARIEVA, Tsypylma, Florian MÜHLFRIED, and Kevin TUIE, eds., *Sacred Places, Emerging Spaces: Religious Pluralism in the Post-Soviet Caucasus*, 246 pp., illustrations, bibliography, index. New York: Berghahn Books, 2018. Hardback, \$90.00. ISBN 9781785337826.

This book presents a thorough and meticulous ethnography of the sacred dispersed over the Caucasus, one of the world's most culturally diverse and historically multi-layered regions. Diversity is a given fact of multiplicity, and the 'pluralism' referred to in the title is an attempt to organize this multiplicity, to make sense of

it, to impose a certain order. What is at stake here is not just the wealth of various religious facts, but the ways that people connect them to each other; share them or compete over them; interpret them differently; construct and reconstruct them; produce hierarchies of authority; insert them into local and nationwide symbolic systems.

The primary object in the book is local, vernacular sacred, as venerated by ordinary people, with female devotion playing a prominent role. This is the sacred in its original Durkheimian meaning, as clots of a powerful force that promises miracles and unites society. These are the cases described in the book: the healing cult of the Baku city holy man Mir-Movsum-Aga, comparable to typical cults of *pirs* and *ziyarat*s (pilgrimages to tombs of the Sufi saints) in Azerbaijan and Dagestan; rural bread-baking rituals in mountainous Svaneti, Georgia; the 'unchurched' shrines (*maturs* and *surbs*) attracting Armenian pilgrims; the recently revived Abkhaz pre-Christian holy places; the rituals of commemoration of the dead in the Russian Cossack village of Zakubanskaya in the northwestern Caucasus; informal sanctuaries of the Armenian Yazidis.

The authors are set to analyze, first, the *horizontal* interaction of different religious systems and their carriers. It might be 'sharing the sacred',¹ that is, sharing shrines and holy places (in this volume, Muslim and Christian encounters), or 'antagonistic tolerance',² that is, tolerating the Others' sacred as an inevitable but precisely different reality. One such case, involving relations between Georgians and Jews in a small town in northern Georgia, is analyzed by Florian Mühlfried. Igor Kuznetsov, in his study of archaic shrines now revived in Abkhazia, is interested not so much in sharing/not sharing, but in the semantic hybridity of the sacred places, its deep 'palimpsest nature'.

The second research task that is central to this volume is the study of *vertical* encounters between actors negotiating over the sacred or competing for possession of it. The two main institutional systems, the church and

the state, challenge the vernacular experience. The struggle for hegemony runs like a thread throughout the book. Three strong churches—the Armenian Apostolic, Georgian Orthodox, and Russian Orthodox—strive to gain control over the sacred. The respective states usually back them: nation building, as the dominant agenda, requires uniformity. Backed by its religious institutions, the state is trying to grind and normalize, ‘to discipline and punish,’ to discredit the vernacular practices as ‘pagan superstitions’.

As true anthropologists, the authors invariably sympathize with their vernacular informants and invariably—implicitly or even openly—accuse religious or secular institutions of aggressively intruding into the popular folk field. The four authors who have written a chapter on Armenian pilgrimages passionately argue that popular Christianity actually represents “an essential component of the national religion” (p. 74). Hege Toje, writing about the funeral and commemorative practices in a Russian Cossack village, also harshly accuses the local Russian Orthodox priest of “creating a hegemonic regime in a religious field” and introducing a “division into communal ties” (pp. 135–144). In the same way, authors writing about the Islamic field are worried about the growing criticism of ‘religious purists’ against the popular worship of *ziyarat*s.

Nonetheless, the studies do reflect the real process—the trend to assert hegemony. However, is this trend something specifically new? Imagining lived religion as a reality *sui generis*, existing by itself and subjected to aggression from outside, seems to be a simplification. The colonization of fluid, archaic folk traditions is a historically repetitive, cyclical, and perennial vector of social dynamics. Disputes over authenticity and the struggle for hegemony have always been, are, and will be. They always imply mutual influence, pressure, resistance, and the formation of complex hybrids and/or compromises. After the collapse of the atheistic Soviet empire, the sacred has once again become the subject of deliberate, ideological ordering by several competing

forces—religious institutions, religious purists, the state, the national intelligentsia.

Here appears Robert Redfield’s famous dichotomy of ‘Great’ and ‘Little’ traditions, which is criticized in the editors’ introduction and in Tsypylma Darieva’s chapter on an urban saint in Baku city (pp. 23–25). Yet the glorification of lived religion as central, true, and genuine, on the one hand, and the portrayal of institutional religion as external, alien, and aggressive, on the other—as we find in some places in the book—constitute the very same fixed and simplistically rigid dichotomy. In my view, the constant interaction of external and local forces is the real process that always happens around sacred places. The influences of all forces involved have always been a part of the story. They should be taken together in a complex entanglement and reformatting of tradition, both from below and from above.

The last chapter complements the general picture. Sylvia Serrano shows how Rabati, an old fortress in southern Georgia, has been transformed into a “heterotopy” of the national “cultural heritage,” where a church and a mosque stand inactive, symbolizing the new “Georgian dream” of secular and inclusive modernity (pp. 218–221). We see here triple entanglement: the state pushes back the ‘Great’ tradition of Orthodoxy, which, in turn, attacks the ever-living ‘Little’ tradition so vividly described in several chapters of this book.

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Notes

1. Developed earlier in Bowman (2012).
2. Coined by Robert Hayden (2016).

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DASWANI, Girish, *Looking Back, Moving Forward: Transformation and Ethical Practice in the Ghanaian Church of Pentecost*, 280 pages, figures, notes, index. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015. Paperback, \$30.95. ISBN 9781442626584.

In *Looking Back, Moving Forward*, Girish Daswani provides a thorough and thoughtful analysis of transformation and change in Pentecostalism. The book addresses these themes through a study of members of the Ghanaian Church of Pentecost and their experiences of religious conversion and transformation. Daswani's analytical approach to transformation offers an original contribution to the debate on Pentecostalism and change. Whereas other studies have approached religious conversion as a singular, linear event, or from the perspective of broader social change, Daswani looks at conversion and transformation as a set of reflective and subjective experiences and practices that happen over a longer period of time. It is through this focus on church members' evaluative work that Daswani puts forward a novel way of understanding religious conversion and religious change in a way that escapes the limitations of the change-continuity debate. At the core of his approach is an emphasis on the ethical framework around which church members assess their conversion, as well as the individual expectations, uncertainties, doubts, and tensions that are part of the conversion process. In this way, Daswani widens the analysis of religious change and transformation to include the dialectical relationship between expectations and experiences.

Despite the empirical focus on the largest Pentecostal church in Ghana (and its branches in London), the book starts out with an informal prayer meeting, where we meet a man who explains his conversion to Pentecostalism and the ensuing religious transformation as a way of creating distance from destructive social relationships involving family, witchcraft, and inheritance disputes. After an introduction and a chapter that outlines the

historical roots of the Church of Pentecost in Ghana, the book consists of six empirical chapters that address the uncertainty around conversion from the perspective of church members in Ghana and in London. Throughout these chapters, Daswani provides ample accounts of people who are Pentecostals and who in their conversion experience struggle in various ways with their past. Conversion and rupture—making a complete break with the past—is a classic theme in the broad scholarship on Pentecostalism. The argument first put forward by Birgit Meyer (1998), which has since been simplified in various renderings, is that the past plays a major role when converting to Pentecostalism. The past comes to the fore both as a way to escape social obligations and restraining bonds, and as a way to reconnect and draw on traditional religious cosmology that was for the main part absent and dismissed in mission Christianity. Daswani draws on this earlier scholarship, but reorients his focus to learn “how Pentecostals experience and describe their transformation” (p. 13).

This has led him to the important insight that conversion presents not only a solution but also a new problem—namely, how to be a Pentecostal Christian in a world full of disappointments, unfulfilled dreams, and uncertainties. The book adds significantly to the debate on religious conversion by approaching rupture as an ethical practice. This implies that rupture is not a constant, but a process that church members experience, evaluate, and question over time. Conversion, as Daswani sees it, is a “double movement, proceeding forward into the future while simultaneously looking back onto not one but multiple pasts” (p. 203).

In the epilogue, entitled “The Future Will Fight Against You,” the man from the first pages of the book reappears. We learn about his frustrations and unfulfilled aspirations and that religious conversion and a Pentecostal identity were not enough for him to become successful. Throughout the book, Daswani argues that Pentecostal rupture and

the clear rules and boundaries of one's Christian life and social relationships do not help explain inconsistencies and misfortune. In this light, a focus on the subjective experiences of conversion as an ongoing process (how to carry on as a Christian) provides an important supplement to our understanding of religious conversion. Rupture is a central part of Pentecostal identity making, Daswani asserts, but only when related to the broader ethical practices and societal conditions that accompany it.

The strength of the book lies in both its empirically detailed analysis of the experiences of rupture and its theoretical approach, which captures the philosophical and reflective aspects of religious conversion, including the tensions, uncertainties, and ethical concerns that are part of Pentecostal transformation. Moreover, Daswani paints a nuanced picture, as he shows how leaders, prophets, and church members perceive and live rupture differently. Many of the examples given in the book illustrate the well-known battles and pragmatism of relating to multiple spiritual forces to deal with everyday problems. It would have been an asset if the author had provided even more insight into the instabilities of Pentecostal ideology and practice. We come to learn how the church seeks to adapt to a changing religious context, and how these attempts (such as no longer requiring women to wear a headscarf in church) are part of the ethical work church members undertake to ensure a common future.

Lastly, as a classical Pentecostal church, the Ghanaian Church of Pentecost is different in some aspects from the many independent neo-charismatic churches that have emerged in the African religious landscape over the past decades and that are the main focus of recent scholarship. Thus, Daswani's study of a classical Pentecostal church—the oldest and largest in Ghana—is both refreshing and important.

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GIRALDO HERRERA, César E., *Microbes and Other Shamanic Beings*, 274 pp., index. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. Paperback, \$99.99. ISBN 9783030100414.

This book is described by César Giraldo Herrera as "a biocultural ethnohistory of Amerindian shamanism and microbiology" that aims to verify "whether and to what degree" the latter "might be commensurable with" the former (p. ix). The author suggests that contemporary microbiology "facilitate[s the] ... translation" (p. 8) of Amerindian shamanic notions since it constitutes a more serious and "appropriate conceptual framework" (p. 6) than "Christian religious beliefs" (p. ix). In fact, the "reduction of Amerindian realities onto the realm of the supernatural and of their ontologies onto Christian metaphysics" (pp. 5–6) constitutes an "epistemic violence" (p. 6). Anthropology's "theological missionary roots" (p. 6) "decontextualized, differentiated into moral and natural histories, adapted, repurposed, and appropriated" (p. 7) Amerindian knowledge.

In contrast to this "association ... with religion and idealism" (p. 20), which made shamans "irredeemable antagonists to materialist science" (p. 21), Giraldo proposes that shamans had "a clear inclination towards empiricism" (p. 53), and that shamanic beings were "not ethereal, but [as] perceivable" as microbes' bodies are (p. 56). Furthermore, thanks to "the unaided perception of the microbial world" (p. ix)—that is, entoptic microscopy—shamans could actually see these bodies (p. 140).

Under the sky of this science-friendly animism, perspectivism becomes "misleading" (p. 25), Philippe Descola's perspectives "remain very much in line with Tylor" (p. 21),

and the so-called ontological turn is reduced to a “bolder version of the classical relativistic principle of anthropology [that] extends relativism onto reality itself” (p. 3). Disguised as a “decolonization of thought,” it furthers the assumption that “non-Western realities, like those of shamanism, are necessarily incommensurable with those portrayed by natural sciences” (p. 4).

Nevertheless, Giraldo does not address the criticism of ontologically inflected anthropology toward key conceptual tools such as ‘society’ (in contrast to ‘nature’) or ‘reality’ (as a single thing out there).¹ What exactly are we intended to understand when, for instance, we read that “the highly social microbial worlds which constitute and permeate us” (p. x) have “many of the properties of ... social beings” (p. 56)? Despite his speculations about “highly social” (p. 72) microbes that make Amerindian taboos look “not unjustified” (p. 75) and that “have the capacity to affect ... our moods ... our emotions” and “perhaps also dreams” (p. 74), Giraldo does not directly address the terms whereby this “non-human intentionality” or “subjectivity” could enter into dialogue with natural sciences (p. 223). How should we tackle, then, this sort of remaining incommensurability? Regarding the concept of ‘reality’, which is so frequently used in this book, Giraldo—who describes himself as “an unrepentant functionalist” (p. vii)—seems to assume that the microbial world is one single reality being accessed in different ways (p. 99) without problematizing the premise of “equivalent epistemologies, granting access to the same realities” (p. 9).²

In addition to the relevance of this book’s conceptual tools to approach its innovative subject, it remains uncertain that shamans have actually “developed enhanced techniques of entoptic microscopy” (p. 142). Why does the author select only written descriptions made by priests and men of the Renaissance (p. 36) of the “Nahuatl society” and “two early encounters with Amerinds in the Caribbean” (the Taino and the Callinago) (p. 34)? How comparable are these early accounts with

modern ethnographies of groups identified by the author as “the Gunadule, the Tukano, the Arawak, and the Yanomami” (p. 66), not to mention contemporary Latin American “Ayahuasca artists” (136)? Why not conduct fieldwork (and let it transform concepts such as ‘real’ or ‘social’) in order to determine if entoptic microscopy actually “corresponds to what shamans see” (p. 135)?

Another problem arises when Giraldo states that “syphilis, yaws, and pinta ... were starring characters ... protagonists of the earliest recorded versions of the myth of the Sun and the Moon” (p. 147). Despite Giraldo’s statements, no myth included in this book seems to have “explicitly referred to beings that caused syphilis and other treponemal diseases” (p. 208).³ Along with a convincing identification of those ‘protagonists’ of the myth, a discussion about its main narrative components, a brief cartography of its distribution, and an account of its previous analysis are also missing.

In contrast to the effort invested in affirming that “Amerindian myths of the Sun and the Moon described shamanic beings causing syphilis,” much less is said about the fact that “the theory that some diseases are produced by living agents acquired through contagion was proposed near after the Encounter by a physician who translated and adapted Amerindian knowledge about syphilis” (p. ix). Giraldo points out that “natural sciences are also rooted beyond the West” (p. 8) and denounces “the prejudice that until the development of the microscope humans were unaware of the existence of microbes” (p. 83). Yet he does not discuss in more detail or give more references about “the true effects of the Encounter in the constitution of the West” (p. 7).

In sum, this book could be considered a draft of a wonderful intellectual project whose appealing arguments, although oscillating between haste and temerity, might still point to an important new path of research in Amerindian studies.

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Notes

1. This could be the reason behind Giraldo's understanding of the 'ontological turn' in epistemological terms, as a type of "knowledge or understanding of being or reality" (p. 1).
2. This postulate might be the basis for Giraldo's use of broad categories such as 'shamanic being,' 'Amerindian myth,' and 'animist.' In the case of 'microbe,' the author recognizes it as "an extremely wide and diverse category" (p. 69).
3. To our knowledge, Francisco de Ávila has not collected, as stated by the author (p. 162), an Andean version of this myth. Nor are "stories about hunters [who have] become lost" actually "frequent" (p. 27) in the Andes.

KAELL, Hillary, ed., *Everyday Sacred: Religion in Contemporary Quebec*, 356 pp., figures, notes, index. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017. Hardback, \$110.00. ISBN 9780773550940.

The publication of *Everyday Sacred* comes after decades of rapid social change in Quebec, and this volume lends fascinating insight into recent transformations in the province's religious landscape. As Hillary Kaell, the book's editor, articulates in her introduction, Quebec continues to grapple with the after-effects of the Quiet Revolution—a period of rapid modernization in the 1960s that also witnessed increased state control over services and systems formerly operated by the Catholic Church—as well as an influx of new immigrants and forms of religiosity since the mid-1990s. Debates about the place of religion in Québécois society intensified further in 2013 following the proposed Charter of Quebec Values, which, among other things, aimed to prohibit public sector employees from wearing or displaying conspicuous religious symbols.

The primary contributions of *Everyday Sacred*, as described by Kaell, are twofold: first, bridging the divide between francophone and anglophone scholarship on North American religion; and, second, utilizing and refining

a 'lived' approach to scholarship, in which ethnographic and qualitative studies about the complexities of everyday life are prioritized over a focus on institutions or broader trends (p. 6). While the book's effectiveness in bridging scholarly conversations remains to be seen in the years to come, this volume is undoubtedly successful in highlighting the complexity, dynamism, and tensions that inhere in everyday religious life. The quality of each author's writing and a shared focus on a single geographical province also lend this book the clarity and cohesion that many other edited volumes lack.

The book is divided into three sections. The first, entitled "Worship and Practice," investigates pluralism and religious change across Quebec. The first chapter, written by Géraldine Mossière, focuses on African-born immigrants at two Pentecostal churches in Montreal. Here the reader gains insight into the experiences of young Pentecostals, who cultivate leadership skills in the context of the church that also set them up for success in the workforce (pp. 50–51). The author captures intergenerational tensions—a theme evident in other chapters as well—that emerge as younger members of the community threaten to disrupt traditional forms of authority.

Chapter 2 by Frédéric Parent and Hélène Charron is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted among Catholics in a small village between Quebec City and Montreal. Here, the increasing regionalization of religious activities has resulted in women leading a new Sunday assembly known as ADACE (p. 61). This chapter raises important questions about intellectual legitimacy as related to gender. Next, Laurent Jérôme describes how young Atikamekw drum players and singers from the Wemotaci community have carried on ancestral practices while also adapting and transforming these practices in recent years. Jérôme emphasizes the evolving significance of indigenous drumming over time as a mode of resistance, a professional activity, a source of economic possibility, and more. Finally, Norma Baumel Joseph invites readers into the

world of Quebec's Iraqi Jews. Forced to leave Iraq due to harsh living conditions starting in the early 1940s, many members of this community initially lost access to long-standing customs, such as their traditional recipe for cooking t'beet, a Sabbath stew. However, the gradual recovery and reinvention of this dish over time has "enabled both the embodying of a heritage and the embracing of a new social reality" (p. 123).

The second section of the book is entitled "Publics and Places," and its three chapters share a common focus on materiality. Writing about rural wayside crosses, Hillary Kaell seeks to "disrupt urban-centred narratives that fail to see the kind of practice and belief operating in the countryside" (p. 154). Her chapter powerfully conveys how modernization—for example, changes to the infrastructure and roadways in rural Quebec—relates to shifting ideas about the natural world and sacred space. Kaell's careful ethnographic research brings her subjects to life in compelling ways while also calling attention to various dynamics, such as the role of women as the regular caretakers of the crosses, that are frequently overlooked.

Emma Anderson's chapter builds off of Kaell's in many ways by analyzing pilgrimage to Quebec's four national shrines. Here, survey data prove that Catholics and others who visit these shrines do so for *religious* reasons, even though the sorts of encounters they seek are more direct and personal than those that preceded the Quiet Revolution. Finally, a chapter by Meena Sharify-Funk and Elysia Guzik confronts a debate to which many of the earlier chapters allude: the role of the hijab and niqab in Quebec. Although this case study feels less grounded in the stories and experiences of specific individuals (especially compared to the two chapters immediately preceding it), it nonetheless powerfully shows how attempts to keep public positions free from religious influence also stand to limit the jobs and opportunities available to Muslim women (p. 206). Although Saba Mahmood's (2005) *Politics of Piety* is not referenced in this

chapter, the authors' findings resonate with and reinforce Mahmood's work.

The third section of the book, entitled "New Frontiers and the Beyond," contains two chapters about new religious movements in Quebec. Deirdre Meintel analyzes the Spiritual Church of Healing as a community of spiritualists who often adhere to more than one religion concurrently and utilize hybrid practices. Although this sort of spiritual mobility might lead outsiders to view these practitioners as superficial or uncommitted, Meintel makes a powerful case for the discipline required in order for these individuals to fashion and maintain a sense of self. Finally, Cory Andrew Labrecque traces how the Quiet Revolution opened up space for new forms of belief and practice. This reality is evidenced in transhumanist communities such as Noös, which serves a number of the same functions that more traditional 'religions' once did. The volume ends with a short afterword by Randall Balmer, a noted historian of American religion.

Overall, *Everyday Religion* is a timely and eye-opening contribution to the study of religion in North America. Each chapter serves to unsettle one or more common assumptions about religion or to destabilize persisting binaries that often prove more hindering than helpful in understanding lived religious experience. Methodologically, this volume will be of interest to scholars in fields such as American religious history, the anthropology of religion, and the sociology of religion, and its dual focus on urban and rural religion helpfully complements existing works like Robert Orsi's (1999) *Gods of the City*. This book would also be of interest to scholars who study secularism, materiality, pilgrimage, gender, pluralism, and identity politics. From an educator's standpoint, *Everyday Sacred* (or selections of it) could be effectively incorporated into college- or graduate-level courses. For example, I plan to assign Kaell's chapter in my undergraduate course, Catholicism in the United States, as a way to open up conversations about the

role that crosses play in our own community in San Diego compared to Quebec.

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KRIPAL, Jeffrey J., *Secret Body: Erotic and Esoteric Currents in the History of Religions*, 448 pp., appendix, notes, index. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. Paperback, \$35.00. ISBN 9780226679082.

CABOT, Zayin, *Ecologies of Participation: Agents, Shamans, Mystics and Diviners*, 352 pp., preface, index. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018. Hardback, \$110.00. ISBN 9781498568159.

We are at a critical point in human history. The global system has been massively destabilized by human activity—we are the root cause of the sixth mass extinction, threatening not just our own survival, but also the survival of the non-human world that surrounds us. Given this state of affairs, it would seem to be high time for new ways of thinking, across all disciplines. The traditional approaches of the hard and social sciences have thus far failed to halt ecological destruction; indeed, they have actively contributed to it. Materialist and reductionist worldviews, combined with rapid industrial and technological advances, have led to an increasing perceived separation of humans from the ‘natural’ world. If ‘new thinking’ is something you are looking for (and I suggest that we all should be doing so), then Jeffrey J. Kripal’s *Secret Body: Erotic and Esoteric Currents in the History of Religions* and Zayin Cabot’s *Ecologies of Participation:*

Agents, Shamans, Mystics, and Diviners are a good place to start.

In *Secret Body*, Kripal semi-autobiographically draws together the various strands of his research, from early work on the hidden homoerotic currents of Christianity, through asceticism, mysticism, and sexuality in Hinduism, to Gnosticism and his current concerns with paranormal experience. The book consists of extracts from Kripal’s extensive back catalogue, arranged more or less chronologically, interspersed with reflective essays and commentaries that contextualize his ideas in wider scholarly discourse. The book concludes with Kripal’s manifesto for a ‘new comparativism’, and culminates with 20 key themes that chart the trajectory of his work and thinking, and that have ‘written’ him throughout his career. In summary, Kripal writes that should we wish to pursue new ways of thinking in academia, intellectuals will have to go through three basic stages in order to escape the gravitational pull of the dominant paradigms (materialism, functionalism, cognitivism, cultural constructivism, and so on) and break through to the other side. Those three stages involve:

- (1) a deconstructive, suspicious, and critical stage aimed directly at the ideology of physicalism that presently defines our reigning episteme, in all its power and problems, and so locks us into what Taylor has called “the immanent frame”;
- (2) a realist comparative practice with respect to our historical materials in conversation with the empirical data of the French *métapsychique*, British psychical research and European and American parapsychological literatures; and
- (3) a speculative positing of new ontologies, sociologies, and ecologies that can replace the conventional materialist and historicist ones and make more sense of all that we encounter, at every turn, in the history of religions. (p. 371)

Zayin Cabot’s *Ecologies of Participation* is a contribution toward the decolonization of academia, and is a challenge to the dominant paradigms of materialism and cultural

constructivism. As such, it is the perfect companion to Kripal's work, and is perhaps representative of the process delineated in the above extract. Indeed, Kripal's influence can be felt throughout the pages of *Ecologies of Participation*, along with the influence of thinkers such as Alfred North Whitehead, Martin Holbraad, and Viveiros de Castro. Central to Cabot's argument (as the title of the book suggests) is his notion of 'ecologies of participation', which are introduced as an alternative framework for understanding the multiplicity of worlds encountered in the social sciences. In this sense, Cabot's book not only contributes to the ongoing 'ontological turn' in anthropology and related disciplines, but also offers a route beyond it. He explains his preference for the idea of 'ecologies' over 'ontologies':

I use the term *ecologies* to allow us to interact. *Ontology* by itself breeds conflict, implying that "I" am closer than "you." *Ontologies*, while provocative, remain useful paradoxes, but have little place in our lives. *Ecologies* are more useful and livable, if we are going to come together, and thus I argue for *participation*, allowing for some sort of process whereby words actually do create the worlds in which we live. (p. 10)

Both Kripal's and Cabot's works call on scholars of religion (or indeed any discipline) to push beyond the limitations of currently dominant paradigms into radical new domains, to reject reductionist accounts of reality and embrace the complexity of lived experience. Both books serve as a beacon to encourage us all to try out new ways of thinking about the world and our relationship to it. This is a perspective that resonates with my own research, and in particular with my notion of 'ontological flooding' (Hunter 2015), which, much like Cabot's book, calls for the destabilization of ontological certainty and a willingness to entertain multiple simultaneous possibilities. Once we admit that our dominant models are flimsy at best, we are liberated to begin thinking about new possibilities. Kripal's and Cabot's books are a springboard

for the next step, and it will be exciting to see where the emerging generation of scholars will take their ideas, and how they might use them to address our current global crisis.

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LAUTERBACH, Karen, *Christianity, Wealth, and Spiritual Power in Ghana*, 221 pp., appendix, index. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. Paperback, \$119.99. ISBN 9783319815299.

The phenomenon of charismatic Christianity's explosion (in the number of both pastors and followers) is endemic in Ghana and sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, but religious scholars and anthropologists have since the 1990s noted its almost global, or at least Global South, significance (Poewe 1994). What is new with Karen Lauterbach's book is that she is not concerned with specific churches or movements, or with their appeal to the general public or their particular form of religious expressions and ideologies—topics that are the most researched and debated within Christianity studies. She focuses on just one aspect of charismatic Christianity's growing presence in the Global South, but one that seems to be the most important: pastors.

The book follows the trajectories of charismatic pastors, mainly from the area of Kumasi, the capital city of Asante region, a historical, political, religious, and economic center of central Ghana. Perhaps the most impressive and important merit of the book is its methodological premise, which is based on extended fieldwork, more than 10 years long, following real people, real lives, real

accounts and life histories, instead of dealing with theoretical debates and infertile generalizations. If I did not know that Lauterbach is a trained geographer, I would have assumed that she is a prominent ethnographer and a naturally talented anthropologist.

But is the most important contribution of the book its ethnographic character? Is it lacking in theoretical insight and analytical overview? No. Contributions to theoretical debates are evident, although the brilliant writing strategy of Lauterbach spreads the theoretical issues across chapters instead of dedicating one specific section of the book to them. The main argument, stated clearly in many parts of the book (pp. 11, 71, 152, 198–200) is that the motivation of young people who receive a calling from God and wish to become pastors—either within an established church or by founding one of their own—revolves around patterns of upward social mobility related to the ‘traditional’ Asante concept of becoming a ‘big man.’ Lauterbach examines the content of such patterns extensively in chapter 2, titled “A History of Wealth, Power, and Religion in Asante.” She insists that becoming a small ‘big man,’ although it presupposes a specific display of wealth as evidence, relies more on the acquisition of social networks of support (family, community, neighborhood) than on material wealth. She documents this claim through presenting local mechanisms to “check out the background” (p. 80) of “fake pastors or spiritual swindlers” (p. 77) in chapter 3, “Wealth and Worth: The Idea of a Truthful Pastor.”

Lauterbach continues the fascinating description of the trajectory of ‘becoming a pastor’ in chapters 4 and 5, where she shows how one’s spiritual power has to be combined with the knowledge of the Bible, the talent of leadership, and the ability to redistribute God’s favor among followers and the community as the ultimate criterion of a pastor’s success. In chapter 6, Lauterbach stresses the importance of having a well-recognized religious figure as a guide and mentor for young pastors, as a sign of credibility and future recognition. Through

a specific ethnographic case, she demonstrates how the lack of a recognized mentor leads many prospective pastorships to failure, despite spiritual or rhetorical qualifications. In that sense, Lauterbach seems to be in favor of a dialectical relationship between autonomy and dependency: young pastors draw on the traditional figure of a spiritual ‘father,’ mentor, and guide, while simultaneously proclaiming their ability to act independently at a certain time in their apprenticeship.

This point brings us back to the theoretical contributions of Lauterbach’s book. Lauterbach states clearly from the outset that she stands critically against two popular strands of thought with regard to African charismatic Christianity: first, “breaking with the past” (p. 17), with regard to charismatic Christianity’s link to modernity; and, second, charismatic Christianity as a response to neo-liberal capitalism (pp. 13–16). One can see the entire book as a counter-argument against these two strands of thought, since it convincingly proves the connection between young charismatic pastors and traditional patterns of wealth and power in the sense of social recognition.

Nevertheless, I believe that, first, the irrelevance of charismatic Christianity to neo-liberal capitalism should not be overstated. It is hard to disconnect the restricted social mobility opportunities linked to global neo-liberalism and neo-colonialism from the widely spread religious entrepreneurship in Ghana and elsewhere. Second, and more important, the insistence on the social mobility aspect of contemporary religious developments in Ghana and sub-Saharan Africa in general runs the risk of unconscious ethnocentrism. By this, I mean that the people involved, themselves, would probably prioritize the spiritual aspect of pastorship at the expense of the socio-political (Kyriakakis 2012). They would probably stress the increase of ‘evil forces’ as the major motivation for becoming a pastor. In that sense, the hermeneutic value of neo-liberal capitalism and neo-colonialism as evil forces par excellence brings to bear

similar, if not more, strength than that of the (beyond doubt) continuity of traditional patterns of power.

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LIBERATORE, Giulia, *Somali, Muslim, British: Striving in Securitized Britain*, 304 pp., figures, index. London: Bloomsbury, 2017. Paperback, \$32.50. ISBN 9781350094628.

In London, in the mid-2010s, a young practicing Muslim woman of Somali origin dreams of a marriage based on romantic love, just like in Jane Austen's novels. She also thinks that Austen's female characters could have been Muslim: the English values they embody, from modesty and honesty to respect for kin, are Islamic values as well. Together with other young Somali women, she takes part in a wide range of religious events and classes, and debates with them this newly acquired knowledge. For all of these women, as a universal faith, Islam is already British. These opinions demonstrate that its adherents think Islam is a "constituent part of the social fabric of Britain" (p. 11), and that they view themselves as belonging to that country.

However, such opinions are rarely, if ever, heard in public space because their utterers are doubly marginalized as religiously dressed women, the personification of the Muslim Other, and as members of one of the most publicly stigmatized Muslim groups in

Britain—the Somalis. Equally importantly, these opinions do not fit into the dichotomies that dominate in post-9/11 Britain, such as Britain versus Islam or British liberalism versus 'extreme' Islam.

It is to Giulia Liberatore's credit that she brings these subjects and issues to the foreground through her ethnography *Somali, Muslim, British: Striving in Securitized Britain*. Liberatore's approach is compelling. Unlike others, be they politicians, theorists, or academics, who focus on Muslims in Europe—especially young Muslims—as being either radicalized or vulnerable, she underlines her interlocutors' capacity to aspire, to recast difficulties as possibilities and continuously orient themselves forward in space and time.

This capacity is gradually introduced with each chapter. After a first chapter that presents this approach and sets out its particularities in relation to the relevant academic debates, the book continues with a short chapter (which could have been integrated into the introduction) that describes the author's experience of conducting fieldwork in London. Chapter 3 focuses on memories of modern Mogadishu and various understandings of Somaliness in relation to tradition, culture, and religion. Chapter 4 narrates Somali women's struggle to settle in London and raise their children as good, educated Somali Muslims. The next chapter contrasts these mothers' aspirations to those of their daughters, who were either born in the UK or arrived as small children. These young women try to articulate their own ways of being Somali, Muslim, and British, using multiple sources of reference beyond those offered by their families and communities.

Chapter 6 details these young women's efforts to accumulate Islamic knowledge, with particular attention to their 'mosque hopping' across London and their reasoned and affective experiences of debating among themselves whether to accept or leave aside the teachings of different reformist groups. Chapter 7 shows how they situate themselves in relation to the usually reductive and negative representations of the pious Muslim in the media,

popular culture, and public debates. Chapter 8 explores discussions about marriage and ideal husbands, and demonstrates how the women's more or less pious projects cannot be easily fit into the mainstream dichotomies, from religious versus non-religious to pious versus integrated liberal Muslim. The last chapter reminds us that their efforts at self-fashioning take place in a securitized Britain, where the 2015 Counter-Terrorism and Security Act aims to create 'good' liberal Muslims by all means, including violence, rather than address the injustices and inequalities that mark their lives, as well as the lives of many non-Muslims in the country.

In articulating their aspirations, Liberatore argues, these Somali women transform the Islamic tradition from within and address the question of (their) difference in contemporary Britain. She shows how they use the tools and concepts of an Islamic tradition that has itself been continuously reformed in relation to what has happened outside Europe prior to migration and to what is happening in the contemporary encounter of Islam with Europe. Moreover, she demonstrates that these women engage critically not only with Islamic texts and teachings, but also with other forms of textual and experiential knowledge about ethnicity, race, culture, nationality, multiculturalism, extremism, radicalization, and Britishness. She additionally points out that their aspirations change in response to fragmented, incoherent, and ambiguous experiences and in relation to co-existing but at times conflicting projects, becoming a pious Muslim being one among others. Through all these demonstrations, Liberatore also describes how a liberal democracy renders invisible certain ways of being and attempts to "scrutinize, manage and govern difference" (p. 8).

The very concept of aspiration, the author convincingly claims, redirects our attention to the complex formation of subjectivity, away from the oppositions that have so far structured, stiffened, and homogenized depictions of Muslims, including segregation versus integration, religious norms versus

everyday actions, and piety versus secular-liberal ethics. In this way, Liberatore's book offers a valuable contribution to the burgeoning literature on subjectivity, gender, Muslims, and Islam in Europe. Equally important, in recounting how its main characters find the resources to "turn moments of potentiality into forms of striving" (p. 257), it stands out as an exemplary illustration of a more 'positive anthropology'.

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MANSUR, Marcia, and Marina THOMÉ, dirs., *The Sound of Bells* (O Som dos Sinos), documentary film, Portuguese, 70 min. Estúdio Crua, 2016. \$320.00. <https://store.der.org/the-sound-of-bells-p1012.aspx>.

One of the main ideas to be drawn from recent debates in the anthropology of religion is that 'religion' cannot be solely defined as a system of abstract ideas or beliefs about the sacred world, but must be understood as a complex and ever-changing set of mediation practices between different agents (practitioners, spirits, ancestors) involving specific material, sensory, and corporeal experiences. This is precisely the reason why cinema, the art of capturing life in motion par excellence, is so apt to explore and convey the kind of relationships that people establish with the 'hereafter'.

In this regard, Marcia Mansur and Marina Thomé's *The Sound of Bells*, a magnificent documentary about the bell-playing tradition in the northeastern regions of Brazil, is an outstanding example of the kind of contribution that cinema can provide to the contemporary studies of religious phenomena. Indeed, the film succeeds in showing the importance of a wide range of aspects of this fascinating musical tradition that go far beyond the realm of 'beliefs,' and also beyond that of concepts and words. To name just a few, these are the astonishing choreographic

movements of the bodies of players when rolling the bells to make them ‘sing’; the depiction of the aesthetic and chromatic environment of the churches where these musical performances take place, and, of course, the strident yet almost hypnotic rhythms that inhabitants of this damaged region of Brazil manage to create out of the bells.

Through a set of close-up shots of the rails of an ancient train line, we discover at the outset that this region flourished in the past, thanks to industry and local commerce. At that time, the train was used to transport passengers, whereas nowadays it transports only metals extracted from the mining resources of the region. In this context, the contemporary music from bells can be interpreted as a form of resilience against this process of social and ecological decay—as if the music from the bells would recall the long history of the city and the urgent need to keep it alive. Bells also acquire a performative role in the film: their music binds the community together and gives people a sense of belonging that acts as a reactive force capable of offsetting the inertial dispersion provoked by young people moving to other parts of the country.

From a technical point of view, the film is shot in a very intimate way, with a highly sensitive camera that frequently gives the spectator the almost magical impression of touching the people and the objects appearing on the screen. The film takes the basic premise of bell-players seriously, that is, that the bells are persons able to sing and possess feeling. Filming the bells as if they were persons is a cinematic ontological assumption.

Before finishing, I would like to briefly comment on the photography and visual treatment of images in the film. The directors employ the saturation of colors and the effect of blurring images to create a baroque and quasi-surrealistic universe that imbues statues and instruments with a special aura that makes them look almost like human beings. These techniques are increasingly used in ethnographic cinema, where post-production is becoming more important

than ever. In this film, these aesthetic choices are justified, and I have no objection to them. I would, however, like to mention one of the risks that we run when making excessive use of these kinds of filters and effects, that is, by embellishing the images of reality too much, we may end up denaturalizing them. Rendering the reality aesthetically too beautiful may be ethically problematic, in particular when treating conflictive issues such as demographic loss, poverty, and epidemic disasters as a consequence of the global mining industry. We are in the age of Instagram and post-photography. All the images that we encounter in our day-to-day lives have been extensively retouched and embellished. The possibilities at hand in terms of color correction and post-production effects are nowadays enormous—and we are free to exploit them. But, as ethnographic filmmakers, we must never forget the theoretical and ethical consequences of our formal choices.

I have often been asked why I make films about religion instead of just writing about it, and *Sound of Bells* would be a good answer to this question. In short, this documentary is an outstanding exploration of a marvelous Brazilian tradition in extreme danger of extinction. I recommend it without hesitation to any person interested in material religion, Latin American politics, or ethnomusicology.

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OOSTERBAAN, Martijn, *Transmitting the Spirit: Religious Conversion, Media, and Urban Violence*, 264 pp., notes, bibliography, index. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017. Paperback, \$39.95. ISBN 9780271078441.

Like much of the Global South, Brazil has witnessed a remarkable growth in Pentecostalism in the past decades. For instance, while in the 1991 census Evangelicals comprised 9 percent of the population (4 percent of whom

were Pentecostal), by the last census in 2010, they had increased their share of the population to 22 percent (18 percent Pentecostal). A more recent 2016 Datafolha poll suggested that the number of Evangelicals had grown to 29 percent (22 percent Pentecostal). Much of this growth has come from former Catholics, whose numbers have shrunk from 83 percent in the 1991 census to 64 percent in the 2010 census. Meanwhile, the Evangelical Pentecostal caucus in Congress has also been growing steadily over the years—in 2018 it had 199 members. Significantly, the October 2018 elections marked a watershed moment in the expansion of Pentecostalism in the country. The explicit support of Pentecostal pastors for the far-right presidential candidate, for the governor of Rio de Janeiro state candidate, and for many other Pentecostal politicians proved decisive in their election to office.

Martijn Oosterbaan's new book is an exciting addition to the literature that endeavors to explain the growth of Pentecostalism in people's everyday lives and in politics in Brazil. Drawing on a decade of fieldwork in two *favelas* (slums) of Rio de Janeiro, *Transmitting the Spirit* provides an excellent analysis of the ways in which Pentecostalism has captured, in particular, the hearts of poor Brazilians. Oosterbaan is interested in the connections between Pentecostalism, politics, entertainment/media, and urban violence in the country. As an anthropologist of religion, he draws on media theory to consider "how religious movements use media to address audiences and how the presence of these media influences the formation of collective identities and sensorial communities that affect political sensitivities in diverse ways" (p. 12).

Oosterbaan's argument is that if one wishes to understand the global growth of Pentecostalism, one has to look at how it is linked to popular media and its socio-cultural context. For him, the context of violence, segregation, and poverty, along with the absence of a welfare state in Brazil, has attracted poor Brazilians to Pentecostalism as it offers a path to (imagined) health, wealth, and security. This

explanation has been the standard scholarship on the explosion of the religion in the Global South. Where *Transmitting the Spirit* innovates is that it focuses on everyday life in the *favelas*, rather than the narrow focus on church life, and it analyzes how religious and secular media jointly create an ecosystem that is used to confirm a Pentecostal view of the world as a battle between God and the Devil. Following the work of Birgit Meyer, the author shows that media is not only about content, but also about reproducing "the sensation of an unmediated contact with or experience of the divine" (p. 15). According to him, the reception of media—listening to worship music, testimonials, and pastors speak on the radio, and watching Pentecostal television channels—is social and, at the same time, performative of people's religious identities. Oosterbaan finds that sound and music help create identities ('non-criminal,' 'believer,' 'honest worker') and produce spaces of purity and sacredness that are used to mark an opposition to the presence of violence and evil in the surrounding environment.

The Brazilian media (newspapers, radio, television soap operas, etc.) project cities—and Rio de Janeiro in particular—as being in a state of permanent war, where violence from the police, drug dealers (commandos), and paramilitary militia groups is commonplace. The author convincingly shows that in a seemingly paradox, churches depend on these representations of violence and recreate them in their own media products in order to present themselves as the only path for protection from such violence. This narrative is also used in the political campaigns of pastors, who are portrayed as "powerful mediators who can combat the violence taking place on both spiritual and worldly levels" (p. 96). It helps that pastors are celebrities in their own right (many having become famous worship singers) and that their images are circulated in the vast array of Evangelical media that exists in the country.

Overall, Oosterbaan has written an excellent ethnography of the intimate symbiosis

between Pentecostal and secular media, popular culture, violence, and politics in the Rio *favelas*. His contention that we need to pay more attention to sound as an important component of this ecosystem is on point. Where an improvement could be made would be a section detailing the author's positionality in the field. The reader never finds out how a white male foreigner was able to establish rapport with locals. How did Oosterbaan get access and negotiate asymmetries of power with them? How did he deal with the real violence from commandos, militias, and the police? How did he fend off pressure to convert to Pentecostalism? Another issue is the lack of research on the uses of social media in the expansion of Pentecostalism in the country.

These questions notwithstanding, I recommend this book unreservedly to anyone who wants to understand the growth of Pentecostalism in Brazil and how it relates to every sphere of life, be it morality, violence, entertainment/media, and now, crucially, politics.

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SRINIVAS, Tulasi, *The Cow in the Elevator: An Anthropology of Wonder*, 296 pp., notes, references, index. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018. Paperback, \$26.95. ISBN 9780822370796.

Tulasi Srinivas started her fieldwork in the city of Bangalore in India in 1998, intending to study how ritual life was changing as a consequence of globalization. Twenty years later, she has published *The Cow in the Elevator*, a book on the anthropology of wonder based on the same fieldwork. Although it might seem to some that she took a detour from her original idea, the author contends that this book does not fall far from what she had proposed to do in the first place. Through this work, Srinivas aims to bring together wonder, religious rituals, and the neo-liberal space in Bangalore. Set in Malleshwaram, a neighborhood to the

north of Bangalore, she proposes to present wonder as a product of rituals and of the capitalist economy through its expression in everyday ritual. Srinivas endeavors to explain to the reader how wonder exhibits itself through a ritual performed with a creative twist, which is eventually consolidated as a part of the particular ritual, with neo-liberalism and capitalism usually being the source of this creativity. The imagery of a cow being taken into a mirrored elevator in a modern apartment in a high-rise building (the visible symbol of neo-liberalism) for a ritualistic house-blessing ceremony aptly exemplifies the coming together of rituals and neo-liberalism.

The ethnographic anchor points of the book are the rituals performed in Ganesha and Krishna temples in Malleshwaram. Each section of the book is written to include the author's ethnographic voice through her field notes, followed by propositions from other scholars and culminating with the researcher's curiosity to look at wonder as being the center of the neo-liberal acts. All arguments made in the book come down to one question: "What if today the pursuit of wonder is the point of ritual rather than the quick return to the solidity of structure?" (p. 5), as was proposed by Victor Turner.

The book, very interestingly, asserts that wonder might be a product of capitalism, but it also exudes the capacity to elicit responses not in conjunction with neo-liberalism. Srinivas gives an example of the festival of Ganesha Visarjana in which the deity is ritualistically immersed in water. The Ganesha temple in Malleshwaram had 'upgraded' the ritual by bringing in a mechanical crane that lifted and immersed the 10-foot-high Ganesha statue into a local water body, leaving the audiences mesmerized and awed by the grand visual. This wonder, enabled by modern capitalism (the mechanical crane) and witnessed by the believers 'collectively' with "radical social hope" (p. 8), presents an antithesis of neo-liberalism that argues for individuality.

Srinivas has dissected wonder to unveil its various forms, which can be understood

broadly in two domains—spatial (liminal and physical) and emotional. She argues that the liminal space between the past and the future is where wonder comes about and can be understood as a ‘fracture’ in the face of neo-liberalism. From this liminal space, the book moves on to the physical and the emotional. In many ways, wonder becomes a fracture by changing the physical spaces in the city under the veil of development and by becoming accessible only to the rich in the form of high-rise buildings and expensive cars.

In the emotional domain, wonder changes the religious rituals and molds them to fit the paucity of time, a limitation posed by neo-liberalism. But sometimes the wonder created through emotions resists neo-liberalism by encouraging people to express their angst about the fear of loss (jobs, homes, self) that capitalism creates. The ritual wherein the angry god expresses his frustration thus combats the neo-liberal idea of suppressing emotions.

The book has various facets: it not only encourages readers to think about wonder as an intriguing, all-encompassing category that is unique in itself, but also recounts the author’s journey that resulted in its creation. Srinivas does not hesitate to take the readers along into the unfamiliar spaces encountered during fieldwork and how these shaped her. “I was an un-Brahmin-Brahmin and an unwomanly woman” (p. 21); “slowly I became more observant. I neatly plastered my hair with oil and adorned my forehead with kumkum” (p. 23); “caste and gender slowly imprinted themselves on me” (p. 23) are some of the excerpts from the book where the author describes how working in the field changed her. In 1999, Srinivas lost her father, with whom she had worked closely, and it became difficult for her to return to her field notes, as they continually reminded her of her father. The episodes of self-doubt, anxiety, and personal loss detailed in the book make an essential point about how a researcher’s own life is intertwined with her research.

The Cow in the Elevator is a rare work on the topic of wonder. It is an important resource

not only for those interested in anthropology, but also for researchers involved in qualitative analysis. More than being an academic resource, this book is an encouragement to explore the unexplored, to bring out the hidden, and to observe the evasive—just like wonder.

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TANEJA, Anand Vivek, *Jinnealogy: Time, Islam and Ecological Thought in the Medieval Ruins of Delhi*, 336 pp., illustrations, notes, references, index. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018. Paperback, \$30.00. ISBN 9781503603936.

Firoz Shah Kotla (FSK), in Delhi’s modern area, was a medieval royal palace built in the fourteenth century by Sultan Muhammed Tughlaq, who was notorious for his cruelty. There, he used to sit two days a week for *shikwa*, the legal form of direct access and complaint to the king, during which he used to redress the wrongs brought before him by his subjects by giving a ruling on each petition. FSK is now a *dargah*, a shrine where Hindus and Muslims alike go to perform the ritual petitioning of the spirits/saints, or *jinn-babas*, thought to inhabit the ruins. The ritual enactment of the former pre-colonial justice of Islamic sovereignty is Anand Taneja’s inception of this book and also the preconization of a modern-day Delhi that has not eluded its past, which still looms as an unresolved, unsatisfied quest for reparation.

Three key dates mark the history of India and particularly its Muslims: 1857, with the inception of colonial rule and the collapse of the Muslim elite; 1911, when Delhi was declared the imperial capital of British India; and finally 1947, which signified the independence and partition of India with the violence that ensued. Indeed, according to the author, a Hindu-majoritarian desire to remove all signs of Muslim sovereignty from

India led to the destruction of a great number of Muslim graves, and hence of the community life, symbolism, and memory they stood for. This made Delhi a virgin territory for development, while the medieval mosques and shrines came under the custody of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), which protected them by prohibiting all forms of religious practice in them.

Nonetheless, a new Muslim political discourse in defense of the ‘Muslim heritage’ began in the 1970s, with grassroots organizations, such as the Masjid Basao Committee, engaged in rehabilitating the religious status of mosques that the ASI had classed as ‘dead’, by restoring both the buildings and prayers. In 1977, at the end of the Emergency of 1975–1977, a period of chaos, brutality, and relocations for Muslim and Dalit working-class people, FSK became the latter’s new space of religious veneration.

The stories of the *jinn*s told at FSK fill the vacuum and illegibility of the post-colonial state’s archive, topography, and memory of Delhi, as their longevity provides historical witnessing to events that occurred millennia apart from one another. They create connections and a kinship of sorts—or *jinnealogy*, as the author defines it—through a sense of time that contradicts the one proposed by the state whereby the future would entail breaking away from the (Islamic) past. At FSK, people present their petitions through modern bureaucratic techniques (photographs, letters, files, etc.), “a transient archive” (p. 54) of the city’s pain that the *jinn*s come to read and listen to, thus providing an image of justice colliding with the amnesia of both the secular and religious establishments.

How can Muslims and Hindus peacefully co-exist at the *dargah*? Taneja outlines the theory of a ‘*dargah* culture’, a popular transmutation of both elite Sufi *tariqas* and prescriptive/legalist traditions of Islam, one that is able to transcend at once class, religious, ethnic, and gender divisions. Since names identify and resuscitate caste and ethnic hostility, at FSK people come together in anonymity, following

the Sufi ethic of *gharib nawazi* (hospitality to strangers), while the ritual vocabulary of justice continues and has increased. According to the author, the ethical world of the North Indian self would be impossible to imagine without Islam. Bombay cinema testifies to this, as it was traditionally set in the bazaar, dominated by Muslim artisans, sharing continuities with the Mughal world and its successor states, and linked to the epic romance storytelling tradition of Punjab. The Muslimness of both Bollywood and *dargahs* across religious identities can be found in *muhabbat*, the Sufi love that transcends differences in the mystical experience of *fana* (obliteration of the self in God). *Muhabbat* also refers to human unbounded desire, which melts community boundaries, caste affiliations and enmities, and troubling state-patriarchal views on structure and kinship. The *jinn*s, much like Bombay storylines of intra-religious and inter-ethnic love, index the longing for an unpartitioned India in which the ecosystem reflects a cosmology of enchantment.

Although such narrations are inebriating, one could hardly see how such a Manichaean understanding of the Muslim world, as opposed to present-day North India, is demonstrated, if not for the meaning it holds for the community attending FSK, whose voices are almost completely absent. Unfortunately, the recurrent political, historical, and even literary connotations limit the analysis of this new phenomenon of *dargah* culture as an explorative Islamic tradition with great potential for its ritualistic and healing forms, and as a way of empowering the individual against societal boundaries and violence.

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WILCOX, Melissa M., *Queer Nuns: Religion, Activism, and Serious Parody*, 336 pp., notes, bibliography, index. New York: NYU Press, 2018. Paperback, \$30.00. ISBN 9781479820368.

Melissa Wilcox's *Queer Nuns* tells the story of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. This worldwide order is known for its queer critique of conservative religious institutions, characteristic adaptation of Catholic nuns' habits, institutional structure inspired by Catholic religious life, and public engagements that support the needs of LGBTQ communities facing religious and social discrimination. Combining several years of multi-sited fieldwork, personal experience, and archival analysis, Wilcox paints a rich ethnographic account of the Sisters that synthesizes her acumen in religious, gender, and cultural studies.

The book's central triumph is its skillful approach to analyzing a group of individuals whose practices of ministry, protest, and performance vary widely and actively defy conventional categorical assumptions. In Wilcox's study, the Sisters are constantly invested in the work of 'ontological transformation' (Kockelman 2013), reworking categories to push for more inclusive, more imaginative religious and cultural possibilities. The Sisters embody the challenge to redefine the categories they inhabit. Although they originated in San Francisco as a loose band of cisgender gay men, the Sisters today encompass a range of genders and sexes. Although some wear characteristically white face make-up (p. 141), not all engage in the same cosmetic practices. Some come from religious backgrounds and have deep personal faiths, while others are adamantly atheistic (p. 37). When faced with criticism that they are not legitimate nuns, they defiantly proclaim, "We ARE nuns, silly!" (p. 67). Wilcox concurs: "If fabulously sexy queer nuns can exist, then perhaps anything is possible" (p. 103).

Despite this apparent lack of unity, what joins the Sisters together is their dynamic relationship to queer social history and their often public, ludic performances. Underlying

these performances is what Wilcox calls 'serious parody', a flexible political performance that "simultaneously critiques and reclaims cultural traditions in the interest of supporting the lives and political objectives of marginalized groups" (p. 2).

The Sisters' engagement in serious parody began in the late 1970s in San Francisco. What started as a group of gay men flippantly donning old nuns' habits on Holy Saturday grew into an enactment of performance politics. Wilcox writes: "People gaped at the clearly male nuns, one in makeup and carrying a toy gun, strolling the city." The early Sisters then had a revelation: "We realized we had a stick of dynamite ... and that we should do something productive with it. We should use it as a tool for social change, for the change that we want to see" (p. 33). This is what the Sisters did. They protested the US's failure to address the early HIV crisis and the Christian institutions that sought to relegate queer life to the domain of sin (pp. 49–50). They heard 'confessions' (p. 98), speaking intimately with those who struggled with questions of sexuality and everyday life. They raised money for charitable causes (p. 52), and, with their eye-catching performances, they called attention to the spiritual and social needs of LGBTQ people in their communities. For instance, Sister Sœur Rose led a "communion-service-meets-AIDS-funeral" (p. 202). Filled with playful sexual innuendo and political commentary, the Sisters combined serious reflection, comedic parody, and a Eucharistic practice grounded in locally understood queer metaphors to evoke an intimate connection among the departed's loved ones. One might say that the Sisters' parody and activism exemplifies them as 'shepherds with the smell of sheep', practicing a variation of pastoral theology by tending to a queer flock while advocating for their just treatment.

While Wilcox's narrative describes the Sisters' mission of destigmatizing queer sexuality and advocating for marginalized groups, it also engages their moral and ethical challenges. How do the Sisters advocate on behalf

of trans people when many in their organization might not understand the unique challenges trans people face in a society so fixed on binary gender categories (p. 129)? How do Sisters of color call attention to subtle, everyday racism within the order (pp. 140–141)? How do the Sisters navigate international queer activism without reproducing hegemonic assumptions that queer life in the ‘West’ is the ideal for queer life elsewhere (pp. 212–216)? Through exploring how the Sisters respond to these questions, Wilcox highlights the Sisters’ embeddedness in a complicated social world where the performative practices of serious parody can both help and harm.

Queer Nuns is an important intervention in the study of religious organizations, queer culture, and the contributions of nuns—in all their forms—to social life. The book also provides deep insight into the social and spiritual conditions for forming religious subjects. Like Rebecca Lester’s (2005) *Jesus in Our Wombs*, this work illustrates both what a nun does and from where she comes. While Wilcox could have more directly addressed issues of class, both among the Sisters and the people they serve, *Queer Nuns* remains a humorous and relevant contribution to contemporary discourses of religious identity and politics.

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