

Maria-Sabina Draga Alexandru and Dragoş Manea, editors.
Religious Narratives in Contemporary Culture: Between Cultural Memory and Transmediality. Brill, 2021, €138.86, 219 pp, ISBN 978-90-04-45374-6 (hardback).

The present volume is an important contribution to the scholarly debate around narratives that are positioned peripherally in relation to centralized religious discourse. The volume brings together an assortment of fascinating essays that investigate traces of religious behaviour in literature, visual arts, popular culture, media, video games, from the vantage point of cultural memory and transmediality.

The book adds to a solid body of scholarship which has explored the place of religion in contemporaneity. It reverberates with theories put forward in works such as the ground-breaking *Religion* edited by Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (1998), John D. Caputo's *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (2006), or *The Future of Religion* by Gianni Vattimo and Richard Rorty (2007). Christopher Hitchens' *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (2007), *The Re-enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Secular Age* (2009) by Joshua Landy and Michael Saler, *The New Atheist Novel: Fiction, Philosophy and Polemic after 9/11* by Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate (2010), the more recent *Religion and Transhumanism: The Unknown Future of Human Enhancement* (2015) edited by Calvin Mercer or *Religion and the Technological Future: An Introduction to Biohacking, Artificial Intelligence, and Transhumanism* (2021) by Calvin Mercer and Tracy J. Trothen, echo in this volume that engages a topic which is an appealing one and which raises questions that have no definitive answer.

The nine chapters of the book are divided into three parts that are meant to follow the three stages of what the authors see as the “interaction between the spiritual and the secular in contemporary culture, that goes hand in hand with the recuperation of religious cultural memory in popular culture and the media” (6). Part One entitled “Negotiations between the Spiritual and the Secular” looks at the process of redefining religion or religious practice when religious belief is absent or when circumstances call for a fundamental reinterpretation of religion due to outside factors. Thus, Marcel Inhoff examines two women poets of the English language whose views on science and religion have been, to a large extent, similar. Thus, Inhoff convincingly argues that Elizabeth Bishop, born in England, in 1911, and Tracy K. Smith, born in the USA, in 1972, belong to the same poetic tradition, despite their many differences. Both of them have a strong interest in science, religion, and observation. Both of them are poets who offer the reader access to their inner self by using a strong conception of knowledge. However, their approaches are different: whereas Bishop chooses closed spaces, Smith takes the universe as her stage in order to explore the self and its dilemmas in front of a universe that denies easy answers. This self may tap into its personal memories, that, in turn, may be interrelated with collective memories that originate in the religious tradition, that has lost much of its content for modern poets.

Sonia Caputa engages the religious question more directly by looking at the role the Catholic Church played in the emergence of the Polish communities in the USA, though not as a religious authority but rather as an instrument that fosters and strengthens an ethnic group. Caputa refers the reader to the creative output of Stuart Dybek, a Polish-American writer, highlighting the characters’ fascination with Catholicism and religious observance which serve as the main elements in his literary representation of the Polish-American ethnic ethos. The ambivalent attitudes to Catholicism in Dybek’s writings are interpreted as instances of

“cultural transformation”(52) in relation to the simultaneous acquisition and rejection of a cultural past.

Mihaela Precup’s thoughtful reading of *The Long Goodbye*, Meghan O’Rourke’s memoir, touches on heart-rending issues related to the process of mourning following the death of one’s beloved mother, when religious belief is absent. The secular approach to death, devoid of any religious ritual, is analyzed in relation to contemporary debates on death and the latest research on mourning with which O’Rourke had been conversant. The absence of organized religion as well as the various faith-specific means of expressing the mourner’s feelings are investigated with a view to illustrating the way in which O’Rourke uses religious language and ritual.

The second section entitled “Oppression and Resistance” opens with an article that analyzes various Romanian visual artistic productions dating back to the 1970s up until the present, focusing on the religious practices, rituals and symbols that were made use of in order to redefine spirituality with a view to opposing various hegemonies – communist nationalism, neoliberalism, the art market, institutionalized religion. Maria-Alina Asavei points to the imbrications between cultural memories and communicative memories, new myths and rituals, as well as memories of repression, political activism or identity politics.

Olga V. Solovieva investigates the notion of Christ’s body as an epistemological matrix that permeates American society at various levels, the non-religious ones included. The article looks at the late 20th century dispute between the theoconservative perspective of a Christian state answerable to the Catholic Church and the neoconservative view of the state obedient to corporate interest understood as sovereign. Solovieva illustrates the obsession with the concept of Christ’s body in American politics both as a deeply-ingrained idea and as explicit discourse by analyzing the rhetoric of political discourses, think-tanks or visual representations, among them, Mel Gibson’s film *The Passion of the Christ*, released in 2004, during the reelection campaign of George W. Bush.

The depiction of Christianity in recent historical fantasy television series is the focus of Dragoş Manea's article entitled "Evil Nuns and Useless Priests." Manea explores the way in which historical fantasy works as a genre, dwelling on its potential to question, undermine or even attack conventional depictions of Christianity, particularly those related to Anglo-American cultural memory. Manea's conclusion is that, in historical fantasy television series, Christianity is primarily constructed negatively, creating historical narratives in which the church is either eliminated, downplayed or completely berated, this reflecting the tendency of secularization noticeable among Anglo-American audiences. The four strategies Manea identifies in recent historical fantasy television series, in their portrayal of Christianity which is generally unfavorable – erasure, minimization, demonization and hybridization –, are discussed in relation to three types of historicity – factual, ethical and ontological, against the modern ethos of progress.

The articles in the third part entitled "Transmedial Religious Narratives in Unreal and Posthuman Worlds" dwell on the characteristics of religious quests in the posthuman world. Thus, "Algorithms of Desire. Dukkha in *the Machine*" analyzes the problematics of desire in relation to cyborgs and artificial intelligence. Anthoni Miccoli looks into how they represent different aspects of our own desire in their attempts to assimilate alterity. The author approaches the problematics of desire from the perspectives of both Western and Eastern philosophy, arguing that certain aspects of Western philosophy are privileged by the ontological patterns that are employed repeatedly in these cultural creations. Whereas Western philosophy examines, to a large extent, the human being in relation to the object and the manner in which we can apprehend the world, an eastern – particularly Buddhist – perspective focuses primarily on the desire that drives such knowing, "and defines the 'dis-ease' of *not* knowing something as suffering (*dukkha*)" (141).

Buddhist perspectives are also present in Maria Sabina Draga Alexandru's article dealing with the question of violence among posthuman creatures. "How to Fight Historical Violence. Posthuman Spirituality in *Cloud Atlas*" investigates the progressive emergence of posthuman spirituality, the final phase of an accumulation process that shows that humans are inferior to posthumans and that the latter have assumed their most significant responsibilities as we move forward. A higher ethical status, improved forms of democracy, and better and more sophisticated human forms are all characteristics of the posthuman condition. Posthumans are human inventions, and their greater sophistication is a nod to the power of the human intellect. However, by elevating themselves above humans and advancing principles that can recreate a society that is peaceful and harmonious, they also carry a serious critique of humanity. The clone in the film uses science to critically reexamine key presumptions regarding religion, ethics and the world, as well as the social structures that regulate the interaction between humans and posthumans. Draga Alexandru is also concerned with the contemporary posthuman reinterpretations of the equality and self-determination issue, as well as the issue of agency in relation to religion, spirituality and technology.

The improvement of the human condition with the help of technology is also the starting point of Andrei Nae's inquiry into the possibility of transhumanist salvation. Based on the analysis of the appropriation of Shelley's *Frankenstein* by the *Hitman* series games, the article explores transhumanism from social, moral and religious vantage points. It prioritizes issues of morality, interrogating the results of the maximization of autonomy and the granting of full freedom to posthumans. After surveying video games from the perspective of the good and bad, canonical and uncanonical, Nae concludes that the video game advocates transhumanism and its criticism of Christianity. Thus, the good ending of the mission in the *Hitman* games suggests that Christianity is not able to save humanity, proposing transhumanism

as the secular savior who can actually free humanity from its constraints.

The book is, thus, a fascinating one for the 21st century reader in search of answers to uneasy questions. By means of the thought-provoking issues it addresses, the book is of interest to both the scholar who is lured by the new trends noticeable in religious narratives, and the lay person who tries to find an anchor in a world ravaged by various disasters and crises, caught between conflicting ideologies and competing discourses.

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