

## Invented Religions


Podcast with **Carole M. Cusack** (30 January 2012).

Interviewed by **David G. Robertson** (with **Chris Cotter**).

Transcribed by **Martin Lepage**.

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**David Robertson (DR):** What if you choose to believe in a faith that you knew had been made up? And what if it worked all the same? That's what [Carole Cusack](#), Associate Professor of Studies in Religions at the University of Sydney, asks in her recent book [Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith](#), and she's with us today. Hi Carole!

**Carole Cusack (CC):** Hi David!

**DR:** So? Why should scholars take invented religions seriously?

**CC:** I think the best way into that query is to understand that human beings create, to some extent, their reality in the sense that they, as individuals and then in communities, tell narratives that make meaning, and they externalise those narratives, those narratives gain an objective status, and then, they're re-internalised by individualized and communities as something that has facticity outside of simply being a human cultural production. That is a kind of summary of [Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's social-constructionist model of reality-building](#), and religion is a kind of worldview and people do precisely the same thing with religions when they join a religion, when they take on a religion: they learn new vocabulary, they tell new stories to each other, new converts or people who are drifting close to joining are told those stories and rehearsed in actions, and language, so that they come to be part of the community. Where I'm going with this is that even though the phenomenon of religion sort of based explicitly on narratives that are known to be fictional seem to date only from the 1950s, there is a sense in which every religion has

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been invented in some sense, even those religions that claim revelation from an external deity. What happens is a person, a prophetic or charismatic leader, has an experience and communicates that experience as narrative to a group of people who haven't had that experience, and they story-build, and talk about it, and externalize it, and objectivise it and then re-internalise it, and it becomes true... for them. And this is one of the issues with invented religions, as I term them in my book that came out in 2010. They are cases where the narrative actually predates the religion. The person who founds the religion already has in their possession a narrative that has been written by somebody else, and they think that this fictional narrative more accurately represents spiritual realities, values, meaning-conveying issues in life, than existent scriptures, and determine that they will make from a fiction a document that becomes a scripture, or a myth, or a program for human spiritual development.

**DR:** It begins with Discordianism, really, doesn't it, that's the first of these invented religions?

**CC:** Well, Discordianism is an interesting case because it's not actually based on a pre-existent fiction, but it does, I think, kick off the phenomenon. It's technically founded in 1957, and consequently, it's the earliest of the religions that I study. There are other examples that fit almost exactly into that same milieu. For example, the quite highbrow American novelist, Thomas Pynchon, in 1958, founded what he calls a 'micro-cult', with Richard Fariña, the late folksinger, that was based on a novel, Oakley Hall's [Warlock](#), and this was a very specific campus-based thing. One thing fascinating about invented religion is the extent to which students, university and college students, are the people who create these stories, create these faiths from pre-existent stories.

Discordianism is Greg Hill, later known as Malaclypse the Younger, and Kerry Thornley, later known as Omar Khayyam Ravenhurst, sitting in a bowling alley with some of their friends, over a few nights, and coming up with the idea that the world as they understood it, which was very much a Cold War view, is just completely chaotic, and that if there is a deity, the deity is the deity of chaos, Eris, the great goddess of discord, called Discordia in Latin, and deliberately

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inventing a kind of farcical burlesque of religion based on this goddess. What's most interesting about them is that even though they didn't work from a pre-existing fictional narrative, they both went and some of the other very important contributors to the religion, like Robert Anton Wilson or Camden Benares, went through the same sort of processes. They both went through a process where they began knowing that they had made it up. But by the time they were speaking with Margot Adler in the middle 70's, when she was writing [Drawing Down the Moon](#), her pioneering study of alternative religionists in America, they both had come to the position that they realized that something that they thought was a fiction, that they had spun, was in fact a reality that was true. And this seems to me to be related, though not identical, to the process of picking up a pre-existent fictional text and attempting to instantiate it. To an extent, they are the authors of the fictional text. You could argue [Principia Discordia](#) was a piece of fiction they produced, and rather than waiting for someone else to pick it up and decide that it should be made into a religion, they gradually became auto-converted.

**DR :** And the other major invented religion that you are concerned with, the [Church of All Worlds](#), they didn't create the texts themselves, rather they appropriated some else's text, Robert Heinlein's [Stranger in a Strange Land](#). How are they different?

**CC:** Well, firstly, Discordianism begins as spirit of parody, as spirit of really kicking out against the culture of the 1950's. It begins in rebellion. It begins in the desire to mock and to even vilify religion as hypocrisy, as ridiculous. And it becomes, to some extent, serious though there is still a strong element of parody, and Discordians tend to be chameleonic, irreverent, very difficult to pin down. The Church of all Worlds, which began at Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri, in 1962, on the 7<sup>th</sup> of April, precisely, if you want. That was founded by two college students, Tim Zell and Richard Lance Christie, and in a lot of ways, they're a brilliant contrast, to Hill and Thornley, because Hill and Thornley's friendship broke apart over the years. They came to understand Discordianism very differently and to, in many ways, become bitter, and to become essentially

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 25 September 2015

broken through their experience of it. It's significant, I think, that Zell and Christie were both psychology majors, and in fact, Zell went on to graduate work in psychology, which he didn't finish. They formed a friendship that Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, as Tim Zell is now known, he says: 'He was Spock to my Kirk.' They speak when... Christie was still alive, he died in 2010... they spoke of each other in terms that were familial, almost lover-like, the idea that when they met each other as friends, as undergraduates, it was the true recognition of the other person in the universe that they'd been missing up to that point. And consequently, they had a very strong shared program for what this religion was going to look like. They both read Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*, which was released in 1961. They both fell in love with the book as they had with each other, and with psychology, and with certain ideas about world transformation. In 1962, what was formed was two branches. The Church of All Worlds, which was the religious arm, with Zell in charge. He was the early developer of liturgy and of praxis, mostly derived from Heinlein. And the waterbrotherhood called Atl, which Christie was in charge of, which became essentially an environmentalist project, an ecological project. And they kept those roles throughout the whole of the next forty-odd years, where Zell is the flamboyant religious leader, the Pagan, the magician, the trickster, the person who garnered public opinion and worked tirelessly as a promoter of the worship of Gaia as a religion, whereas Christie worked as almost entirely as a secular environmental activist, having done graduate work in environment science. So their religion doesn't have a parodic element. It's serious. It's devotional. There's playfulness there, but that comes largely, I think, from the sense that Heinlein's own novel is full of playfulness, and the wholehearted rejection, especially of mainstream sexual morals, and wage slavery, and other kinds of ideas that were considered to be the successful life in the 1960's, places CAW in that hippie drop-out rebellious camp, but it's a rebellion that is not characterised by parody or by savage satire of religion. It's rather a religion characterized by rejection of mainstream standards, and a religious vision, which actually is entirely serious.

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 25 September 2015

**DR:** The element of satire comes back strongly with what you described as the Third Millennium and invented religions with... and they're going further into things like Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster being outright attacks on religion, not just playful satires. Is there anything behind that change?

**CC:** That's an interesting one and actually I think it's important at this point to just refer for one minute to what Robert A. Heinlein said himself. He actually, even though he shares some values with CAW, i.e. he was into nudism, and polyamory, and he was politically very radical, sometimes very right wing, sometimes very left wing. He is absolutely non-religious, and he did not want his novel to be read as a religious tract. That's quite interesting because it's a novel that largely about religion, in various forms. But there is a notion that wants that once an author releases a story into the world... I started with storytelling in the way that humans use stories to world-build and to create identities. Heinlein released this story into the world and it was enthusiastically taken up by enormous numbers of mostly young people in the 60s. And in the early 1970s, Tim Zell began corresponding with Heinlein, and Heinlein subscribed to Green Egg, the newsletter that CAW published, and he always maintained, in fact, there's passages in his published letters, that he doesn't believe any of it, and he doesn't really think that it was a great idea to turn his novel into a religion. But nevertheless, he came to like Zell and to find value in the way that he was appropriating this story and making the story live in a different way.

The Third Millennium new religion you just mentioned, the Church of Flying Spaghetti Monster, of course, it doesn't start as a religion at all. It starts as a narrative that is a mockery, a very funny, and very clever mockery of intelligent design, the latest largely Christian repackaging of Creationism, which is very important in America, where issues about religion are so much more debated than they are in Europe or Australia, where I'm from. And of course, Bobby Henderson released that story into the world. He wrote [\*The Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster\*](#), an enormously funny book, and he created a mythology, he gave the FSM a noodle-y mess with meatballs for eyes as the

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creator of the universe. If you're going to have to specify an intelligent designer, why shouldn't it be the FSM? He created also a religion that would appeal to college students. Heaven has strippers and a beer volcano. So what happened of course was that people who read this and first thought what a hilarious piss-take it was, started saying exactly what Zell and Christie said about *Stranger in a Strange Land*: 'This is fiction so good, it should be true.' So you have people starting sectarian branches of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster in the spirit of parodic religion, and Henderson has declined ever to be considered a prophet. But he's also said he doesn't really care what people do with it. He released it onto the market, people can pick it up and they can do with it what they want. And so you have the guy who publishes 'Spaghetti-grams', which are anagrams done on the computer, using the words 'Flying Spaghetti Monster' and say, for example, whatever issue that you want advice on... so 'Flying Spaghetti Monster sexual morality', and you get Spaghetti-grams, which are four line quatrains, arranged of anagrams from the letters that are available. This is a kind of divinatory advice. People who wear colanders, pasta strainers, on their heads as religious headgear, as a recent case in Austria where a young man requested that he'd be allowed to wear such headgear in the photograph featured on his driver's license, was tried in the courts and found to be a valid religious headgear. And so the story is what's important, and how people build that story into an identity formation, whether as an individual, or whether as a group who want to create a cell, a church, for the FSM in real life. And that's very amusing and very good fun. And it does critique religion, but it critiques religion in an interesting way because, I think that scholars who, for a long time, have been comfortable with the idea that there could be religions that don't have any gods, that in fact aren't supra-empirical or supernaturally oriented, there are just really about what people do in their lives... this is not generally a view that the person in the street finds easy to accept. Usually, if you vox-pop, one of the first things you get, if you say 'what do you think there has to be as a vital element to make something a religion?', most people will say God or gods. But scholarship is very comfortable with the idea that religions are really about people, this is because scholarship is a secular activity. It's not theology. It's not confessional. We

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understand that human beings are makers of their own worlds. And so, those people who are making their religious world out of the Star Wars trilogy or the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, they're doing something that scholars are very comfortable with.

**Chris Cotter:** You're raising very valid points which gel with my own work into the atheists, etc., and one of the big critiques that contemporary atheism or non-religion has of religion is that it is invented, and they spend an awful lot of time demonstrating that the Bible was written by people or this religion was just founded by some guys who wrote a novel or whatever, and they seem to think that this will make a difference. Does it?

**CC:** No... look, I think this is one of the great problems with atheism in the 21st century. I'm very sympathetic to atheist discourses and I think it is correct that they're included among other religious discourses. But for me, the main problem is that atheists seem to think that if you can mount and knock down arguments that are based on either rationality or empiricism, the twin poles of the Enlightenment, that you won't be able to make people realize that their beliefs or their practices are erroneous and should be abandoned, and it seems to me that this is entirely counter-intuitive. Human beings are capable of rationality, but very very few, even educated Westerners, operate consistently on principles of rationality, and you only have to look at statistics from the US, which often talk about the fact that people who have science degrees are very likely to be Creationists. Human beings have compartmentalised knowledges, issues of identity formation, and things that they considered precious and important, and these don't often bleed into each other. So I'm afraid I think the atheist argument that you can demonstrate that religious texts were written by humans, or that you can demonstrate that the founder of a particular religion, like Joseph Smith or L. Ron Hubbard, was in some sense a huckster or a fraud, I don't see that these are important because they don't take into account that the lived experience of people is more powerful to them than any kind of argument drawn from rational principles. Maybe it shouldn't be that way, but it seems to me that it is how it is.

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**DR:** Scientology is a white elephant in your book, isn't? Is that a deliberate decision so as to not get sued or... I can't imagine that's the case, knowing you... or was it rather that you considered them or don't consider them to be in the same class as the other invented religions?

**CC:** Scientology is really difficult. It comes out of exactly the same milieu. The Church of Scientology is founded in the 1950s, 1954 to be precise, on the back on [Dianetics](#), and yes, it contained science fiction tropes, and in the 21st century, what we know about it looks a lot like an invented religion. I am ambivalent about Scientology, because I don't think it begins as an invented religion. It begins as a critique of psychiatry. It begins as a therapy. It begins as a... an answer to the problems of modern life, and it's not surprising that when *Dianetics* was released, major psychologists like Erich Fromm actually reviewed it, and it was treated as a work of amateur psychology. What's interesting about it is that it goes along exactly the same track as the theosophical legacy, because L. Ron Hubbard begins with clearing engrams that are experiences that ones has had in the past in one's life. They the engrams go back to *in utero*, then they go back to past lives, and before you know what happened, these past lives may be on other planets involving extraterrestrials. This is in fact exactly what happens with theosophical ascended masters. Madame Blavatsky's masters where real Tibetans living in Tibet, who were alive in her life. After she died, mediumship contacted people who were dead, people who lived in Ancient Egypt, mythical figures like the Comte de Saint Germain for people like Guy Ballard and before you know it, it's people from other planets, Venusians like Orthon who speak to George King. These sorts of things are a logical extension. So in some senses, I would place Scientology in a post-theosophical therapeutic milieu. And I think, as we came to know as scholars, a lot more about the Operating Thetan levels, the Xenu mythology in particular made it look a lot more like an invented religion, but at the moment, I'm just not 100% sure that I would put it in the same category.



## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 25 September 2015

**DR:** Well, this is absolutely cutting-edge research. Has anybody taken up your research and challenged it or taken it further?

**CC:** The interesting thing is that it's evolving so fast, I'm not quite sure. I came up with the term 'invented religions', but I really wanted emphasis to be placed on the subtitle, which was *Imagination, Fiction and Faith*, 'cause I think the human imagination creates the stories, the stories are fictions, people come to have faith in them, I think that's really important. But very, very shortly before I completed the book, I met Markus Davidsen, who's doing his PhD at the University of Leiden and the University of Aarhus, and he is working on what he calls '[fiction-based religions](#)', because he's working on Jediism and spirituality and religious groups that have grown out of the Tolkien mythos. I thought in some sense that was a better title. We discussed this privately and he went for 'fiction-based religions' because he thought that all religions are invented, which was where I started today. And I could see the sense of that, but then we linked up with Danielle Kirby, who's at Monash University and who did her PhD on the Otherkin, and she argues that 'fiction-based religions' is no good because it's too passive a term, and what we're really looking at is a kind of actively constructed type of new spirituality, that... you need the dynamism of invention and you need the content of fiction, but what we're still looking for now is a better term to characterize these groups. That being said, I've had very favourable email contacts from mostly Discordians and members of the Church of All Worlds, including Oberon Zell-Ravenheart who actually helped me a lot with the research that I did in that book, and they are very comfortable with my term 'invented religions'. But these, of course, are not people within the academy and I think it's within the academy, that the category, that area, whatever you want to call it, is going to be developed and refined, and that's happening, it's just not quite clear where it's going to go yet.

**DR:** Professor Cusack, thank you.

**CC:** It's been a pleasure.

**Podcast Transcript**

Version 1.1, 25 September 2015

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