



Hyper-Real Religion, Digital Capitalism and the Pygmalion Effect

Podcast with **Adam Possamai** (6 November 2017).

Interviewed by **Sammy Bishop**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

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Sammy Bishop (SB): *Hi. I'm [Sammy Bishop](#), here on the last day of [SocREL 2017](#). I'm here with [Professor Adam Possamai](#) from Western Sydney University. And today we're going to be covering hyper-real religions. So thank you very much for joining us.*

Adam Possamai (AP): It's a pleasure, and hello everyone!

SB: (Laughs) *So hyper-real religions are, for example, religions such as Jediism, Matrixism. But before we discuss them in some more detail, could you give us some of the cultural context that they've come from?*

AP: Yes. And in my work I discuss how new religions are created through new social media and the internet. But, of course, the changes in society and culture are not just about those new technologies. They're also about some profound changes happening with regards to markets, capitalism – in my work I speak about neoliberalism, which started since the 1980s with the work, of course, of the politicians Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. But it has moved and invented itself. To use the work of [Mitchell Dean](#), it's a “thought collective”, in the sense that it adapts itself, it moves around. And today we are faced with what can be called digital capitalism. It's the new face of capitalism. If I can go back to the work of [Frederic Jameson](#), in which he speaks about three phases of capitalism, and the

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latest, that he mentioned in his work in the 1980s, was late capitalism. Today we can argue that we're in a fourth stage, which is digital capitalism. And there are new fortunes that are made in the digital world. There are new inequalities that are made, as well. And these new technologies, those social and cultural changes are also affecting religion. And one of these changes is allowing people to go on-line to mix and match these spiritualities and philosophies, together with popular culture. And today, in those new activities, the religious actors are “pro-sumers”, the producer and the consumer of culture on-line. And with Jediism, which I've called a hyper-real religion, which is a type of simulacrum of religion. hyper-reality makes reference to the work of [Jean Baudrillard](#) and where he speaks about "copy of the copy" and the simulacrum. And here, when you analyse the text online, or in various other forms of new social media as well, you see that people involved in Jediism construct a kind of *bricolage* or *assemblage*, pick and choose certain elements from various spiritualities and philosophies and use this as a source of support to speak about Jediism. But Jediism in a way . . . they do, of course, realise that this is a work of fiction, but it makes sense to them. If you go back to the 1980s, with the New Age movement, in which people were creating spirituality for themselves by themselves, by picking and choosing certain elements of spiritualities and philosophies – in hyper-real religions you have people who do that as well. They create a spirituality for themselves by themselves, but include popular culture more and more.

SB: *You referred to this as the Pygmalion Effect.*

AP: Yes.

SB: *Could you explain that in some more detail?*

AP: Yes indeed . The Pygmalion effect – and here I'm making reference to the Greek myth of Pygmalion who was this sculptor who created the sculpture of a woman, whom he fell in love with. Her name was Galathea. And he wanted that

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sculpture to come to life. And Aphrodite heard him and gave life to this statue and she came to life. And that's the idea with the Pygmalion process. More and more we see the divisions between popular culture and our everyday life being blurred. And it's not just in religion. You have, for example, the phenomenon of [Cosplay](#): people who go to certain festivals and events and start to dress as their favourite character etc. On [May the 4th](#), more and more there are events and conventions and people dress in various costumes. You have zombie walks where people will go and disguise themselves as zombies and start marching. You have Quiddich games from the Harry Potter and some new sports have been created – not just the Quiddich game but also Chess boxing, which is from the comics of [Enki Bilal](#). And that author created the sport of Chess Boxing, which is mixing playing chess and boxing. And we now have competitions happening in real life. So here, to come back to again to the work of Frederic Jameson, when Frederic Jameson speaks about late capitalism – and when I speak about digital capitalism, it also affects culture – when Jameson was speaking about late capitalism he realised that the way it was affecting culture: it was blurring the distinction between art and popular culture. And art was getting influenced by popular culture and popular culture was being influenced by art. And he was speaking about various forms, a pastiche approach – *bricolage* – and this intersection between those two fields of creativity. And in digital capitalism what I'm arguing is that it's popular culture with everyday life. You find that everyday life gets inspired by popular culture and, as always, popular culture is inspired by everyday life. But we've got this new direction. It's always existed, but it's becoming stronger and stronger. And so the Pygmalion process makes reference to this blurring of the boundaries between culture and everyday life in this phase of digital capitalism. And some religions are affected and some religions are created, such as Jediism and Matrixism. But there are different variations as well. You do have people who will follow that religion and say, “I'm a Jediist and I'm inspired by the narrative of *Star Wars*”, which is based on various aspects of various philosophies and religions. But some people might say, “I'm inspired by *Star Wars*, but I won't call

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myself a Jediist.” So it's not that . . . or someone will go and read or watch the [Da Vinci Code](#), and be inspired by the story there and reflect on their own religion. It's not necessarily believing the narrative that's been said, but it's about people getting some inspiration. And, of course, at different levels of inspiration that you can find when you use popular culture and religion.

SB: *So, some of these hyper-real religions, the pop culture that they come from can contain some quite revolutionary aspects. Could you say more about that in relation to their contexts as well?*

AP: Yes. One of my questions in my research studying Jediism was that Star Wars is a great narrative of a sort of spirituality. But what we often forget – in those spiritualities, I mean – is that in Star Wars there is a fight against the Empire. There is a counter-hegemonic process. And the whole story is based on that: the rebellion against the empire. And what I discovered is that there's not much discussion. I don't necessarily speak about rebellion or revolution, but that leaves some room for discussions against the hegemony, in the face of digital capitalism. And it creates new inequalities. There are more and more inequalities in the world. As we said, a strong difference is between the haves and the have-nots. And I'm thinking that *Star Wars* can be a source of narrative to be counter-hegemonic, in that sense, trying to see what can be done. But to this day, in the research that I've collected, I haven't found that. And here I come back to the work of [Gramsci](#), who was speaking about popular religion and he equates hyper-real religions to popular religion. Although he doesn't put popular religions in the same category he speaks about certain elements of certain popular religions, that they can be counter-hegemonic. They can, at least, state something against the status quo, act against the status quo. But in this world of internet, in which we expect a world of multiple possibilities, with multiple interpretations, I realised that it's not that multiple. And that aspect that it could have, I didn't find it.

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SB: *So, looking to the future, do you think these hyper-real religions might become more established and more recognised than they are at the moment?*

AP: That depends on how you define established. Because there is a whole debate about it. This discussion is happening on the internet: should hyper-real religion stay on the internet or should a temple be created and become more physical in the offline world? I don't know, it might happen, it might not happen – establishment. It's very fluid. It can be transient. Someone will be interested for a few months or a few years and then move to something else. Will it grow in giving inspiration to people? Yes. We are born with popular culture, straight away. And especially the younger generation, through YouTube now, access to popular culture is so easy. It's not like when I was growing up, waiting for certain shows to come on television at certain hours. Now you go on the internet or use Netflix and you can access almost everything instantaneously. And more and more we live through popular culture. And we make reference to popular culture. So people will still be influenced by popular culture for religion, for sure. And I expect this to grow with the new generations as they're influenced more and more by popular culture. Will it be established? I'm not able to answer that question.

SB: *Could you tell me some more about the demographics of people involved in hyper-real religion?*

AP: Yes we don't have concrete data on this, but I expect it will be generation X and Y, mainly. Although there are some baby boomers involved as well. Because we do have some hyper-real religions that started before the internet, like the [Church of All Worlds](#) which is a neo-pagan group. and they were extremely influenced by the science fiction book by [Robert Heinlein, *Stranger in a Strange Land*](#). But here, in those hyper-real religions, before the internet there was inspiration from popular culture, but that was more secondary. And what I found is that in those that appear after the internet, popular culture became more central: Jediism from *Star Wars*; Matrixism from *The Matrix*. And to come back to

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the Church of All Worlds, they were inspired by *Star Trek*. But I haven't found a religion in *Star Trek*, although some work has been done on people following *Star Trek* in a religious way. So what I find is that hyper-real religion started before the internet, and there are still some people involved in the Church of All Worlds who will be older of course. But the growing trends are really starting at the beginning of the 21st century, especially with the development of Web 2.0. And we do have a younger generation – who were fully immersed in that – who are getting older. But we do have a younger generation coming on board as well and using all the forms of new social media. So I won't say it's generation specific, but there's a larger proportion of generation Y, I would say, in my estimation.

SB: *And, kind-of linking on from that, the freedom that the internet allows: someone might think that people would beginning to create their own texts rather than looking to popular culture. Could you expand on that a little, perhaps?*

AP: Their own religious texts?

SB: *Yes, their kind-of religious resources.*

AP: Ah that's what you do have. And this was really in the 1980s with the New Age: people speaking about what they were interested in, taking a *bricolage* approach, or an eclectic approach and by this I mean people taking a bit somewhere and linking to something else, and this gives meaning to people. And they will be writing about that or speaking about that, and now they're able to post this on-line. And some people speak about their interests in the world in a blog, and some of them will mention spirituality of course, and spirituality inspired by popular culture. So hyper-real religions basically refers to those religions that come out of the internet, but also the Pygmalion process by which people feel that they can speak about popular culture on the internet as a source of inspiration, and not necessarily being a religion as such. Myself, I'm influenced by popular culture sometimes. This is not a religion for me and not for other

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people – as I said. We were brought up with popular culture and sometimes we find inspiration from certain works of popular culture, either a reflection about the world or reflections about the self. And this is a growing trend. And some people speak about that quite openly on blogs, for example.

SB: *Where do you see your own research going with this in the future? What are you working on at the moment?*

AP: With this? I've got a [book](#) coming out in December of this year, on the i-zation of society and neoliberal post-secularism, in which I speak about religion and digital capitalism. And this work on the Pygmalion process and hyper-real religion is a part of it. I also speak about the way religious groups now are creating apps for iphones or ipads and how religion is really moving into new social media and how the new social media is changing your practices. So there are plenty of apps that you can find, such as Bible reading. And we find that some people attend a church and check that the religious professional is quoting the Bible accurately. And so people use apps for various reasons through their everyday life and there are changing patterns as well. And it's this idea that you can use your iphone, you carry it with you all the time. And so, basically, you're connected to digital capitalism – this online world – at all times. If you go back in the 1980s or '90s, you had to walk to a computer to do it. Or even if you had a laptop, physically, you had to set it up. Now you just walk everyday, you take your ipad, your iphone. It's instant. And I speak about those new social trends that are affecting our everyday life, and how it impacts on religion, and how religion also impacts on those trends as well.

SB: *What would you say are the main impacts that they have on religion?*

AP: More and more people are more networked and instantly they can use a Twitter account, or they can put some reflection on themselves, on their religion in the new social media and its very instantaneous. So, to explain the impact, I've

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adapted George Ritzer's theory of [the McDonaldisation of society](#). For Ritzer, the McDonaldisation of society is the increase of rationalism. He was inspired by the work of Max Weber on the rationalisation of society and instrumental rationality as we move bureaucracies to everyday life. And with the idea of the McDonaldisation of society, that we get out of the home and we go to a restaurant, we go to a school and we're exposed to this rationalisation process. Now this has changed. It has accelerated with those new i-technologies: iphones and ipads. And that's why I speak about the i-zation of society, in which the rationalisation process has increased and is now part . . . it's on the self, we carry it all the time. And we've got access to new apps in which we can manage our life in a better way. And part of managing our life is, for religious people, it includes being religious. It's a very hectic world. People are very busy: work is demanding; people want to read or see popular culture; some people have children that have to be driven all around, very often; and people are short of time. And those new technologies are basically helping people to rationalise their life and be able to be more active as a religious person. So, I've read research which showed that some people don't have much time to read the Bible before going to a church reading group, but they will get the app and check what they have to read very quickly, so they will be ready. So those new technologies are allowing people to be able to be more organised in their life: organised, as if we manage ourselves as a small company or a small bureaucracy. But this is our life today in which we try to fit everything in. And some of those apps are basically allowing religious people to continue to be religious in a more efficient way. And this is why I speak about the i-zation of society in which there's been an increase in rationalisation through those new technologies.

SB: *Great. OK, I think that's about our time up.*

AP: OK, thanks.

SB: *Professor Possamai, thank you for spending time with us today.*

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AP: It's been a pleasure. Thank you so much.

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