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Book review
John C. Lyden/Eric Michael Mazur (eds.),
The Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture

From television to fashion, from sport stadiums to electronic dance music events, from Hinduism to contemporary Paganism – with its 28 chapters, *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture* comprises a vast array of "Mediated encounters", "Material encounters", "Locative encounters" and "Religious traditions", as the four sections of the collection are titled. As John Lyden's introductory chapter, entitled "Definitions", notes, the three terms involved here – "religion", "culture", "popular" – are all notoriously difficult to pin down, and thus this volume takes the approach of embracing the blurriness of these categories' boundaries and casting its net as wide as possible, both with regard to the material discussed (including not just television, popular literature or music, but also food, fashion, toys, kitsch and monuments/memorials), and with regard to the forms the encounter between religion and popular culture may take. Lyden writes, "We cannot precisely define where religion leaves off and culture begins, or vice versa; and that's okay. This does not erase our discipline. Rather, this reveals what we are actually doing; we are constructing our own identity out of a variety of materials, and not refusing to consider materials for being either too 'popular' or too 'religious'" (19).

The first section focuses on prominent media of popular culture: television, journalism, film, radio, music, video and Internet games, the Internet and social networking, and advertising. Although the exclusion of comics or popular literature from this section could seem somewhat arbitrary, the focus here is on audio-visual, electronic mass media and how they facilitate the encounter between religion and popular culture in their representations, forms of communication and community building or through practices that are analogous to religious practices. Thus, Elijah Siegler discusses television in terms of its various religious roles, based on Weber's types of religious leadership: in its priestly function, it conservatively affirms shared values and provides social stability, in particular by reinforcing Protestant ethics over against those portrayed as "other" (Catholics, atheists, and fanatics). Yet this is not all there is to television;

Siegler also notes a more prophetic, critical voice that offers life-changing alternatives, for example in animated shows or through the introduction of flawed heroes. And finally, Siegler introduces a third function of television, namely its rabbinic facilitation of argument about and reflection of values and traditions among its viewers. In spite of the rich material offered by television, even in times when its reception is changing (through DVD or Internet streaming instead of the classic television set), it remains a "largely unexplored territory" open to more detailed exploration (60).

Where one-way communication is predominant in television, in their chapter on Internet and social media Heidi Campbell and Paul Emerson Teusner introduce a medium shaped by interaction and mutuality. Religious groups have used the Internet both as a useful technology and "as a spiritual medium, facilitating spiritual experience … a sacramental space" (157). Current research on religion and the Internet notes in particular how the Internet contributes to the development and negotiation of religious identities through the possibilities of deliberately (new or different) religious self-presentation online, although this online identity may be supported by offline cues or patterns in moments of insecurity. Internet-based communication fosters a sense of community and belonging that might complement offline membership in religious communities, but is also shaped by the structure of personal networks developed through social media sites such as Facebook. While the Internet is often perceived as a space of egalitarian, democratic communications that might challenge traditional religious authority, this does not mean that it is a space without authority structures, and, in fact, institutional power may be both affirmed and challenged through new media. These insights underline that the online and offline spheres are less clearly separated than often imagined, and thus future research will have to look at "how offline religion imprints online behaviors and how innovations in religion online may transform religious culture in the larger sense" (165).

The second section of the *Companion* focuses on physical objects as elements in the encounter between religion and popular culture: popular literature, comics/graphic novels, food and cooking, fashion, games and dolls, and kitsch. The extension of popular culture to include material culture is a positive development, as often popular culture seems limited to those electronic mass media discussed in the first section, with no attention given to the resources for meaning making that the often-unnoticed elements of material culture such as clothing or food provide. Unfortunately, however, in most of the chapters in this section, materiality seems to be simply what their subject of study *is* – a book, a toy, a T-shirt – without a more conscious use of "materiality" as a category of analysis: what does it mean to be able to handle these objects, to place them on one's nightstand or exhibit them in the living room or to share them with others? How do they change or decay through use? What difference does

the physical format of a comic book make, or its thickness, the quality of its paper or colors? Thus, while offering fascinating insights into the large market of religious popular print literature, including developing new genres of African American and Islamic religious literature, the chapter by Jennie Chapman does not reflect in more detail on what the physical materiality of the books means in terms of production, the representation of religious themes, or the religious experiences through reading and sharing. Similarly, the chapter on food by Benjamin E. Zeller focuses much attention on mediated food – cooking shows or texts promoting particular diets – with a short section on religious food kitsch (chocolate deities), and discusses how food as a "quasi-religion" creates communities and a sense of identity and morality (243), but it does not reflect on the experience of shopping for ingredients, preparing food, its textures, tastes, smell, or colors, practices of sharing food or eating.

Nevertheless, the chapters in this section add a wealth of material to the discussion of religion and popular culture. Leonard Norman Primiano's chapter on kitsch is particularly interesting given that often popular culture is seen as precisely somewhat kitschy and in poor taste, and shares with kitsch the association with mass-production and mass-marketing. In fact, as Primiano writes, "kitsch represents human artistry … as an expression of popular culture" (285). Closely linked to modernity both in terms of the appearance of the term (post-1850s), its imitative aesthetics and the mass production and mass marketing of kitsch objects, kitsch can be seen as a response to the issues of modern life and a means to negotiate them. Kitsch objects are open to a variety of uses, as means of creating religious identity, objects of devotion, pleasant toys or objects of artistic re-signification. When thinking about kitsch and religion, attention to the object itself is not enough to understand its religious relevance; instead, the object's use and the user's investment in the object are central: "ardent religious commitment might result in the active transformation of cheap or aesthetically suspect objects into cherished instruments of authentic vernacular worship" (305).

The chapters collected in the third section focus on "the encounter of the two [religion and popular culture] in defined space, at a definite (if not always defined) time" (313). Briefer than the others, the section includes chapters on the shopping mall, electronic dance music events, the sports stadium and monuments of civil religion. Interestingly, there is no chapter on a religious space (e.g. a church, cemetery, or shrine) in which religion and popular culture encounter each other, even though the integration of popular culture in religious practices is noted elsewhere. Instead, the chapters focus on how apparently secular spaces become significant religious spaces through ritual, changes in the perception of time, or the creation of (new) communities, as Jeffrey Scholes discusses in his chapter on sports. Darryl Caterine's chapter on monuments and

memorials, by contrast, underlines the differences between the ways in which the Puritan antecedents to civil religion established sacred space as hierarchical, rooted in an ahistorical view of time and theocratic understandings of politics and power, and how this happens in the monuments of (democratic, national, historically situated) civil religion, such as the National Mall in Washington D.C. Only gradually did the Mall (and with it, Washington D.C.) develop into the central symbol of the nation, which previously had been symbolized primarily through its vast natural spaces. Yet in the second half of the 20th century, the symbol of national unity became one of separation and protest, exposing "the violence inextricably linked to the nation's consolidation" (390). Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial (1982) marks the beginning of a new form of monuments to civil religion that no longer try to evoke a mythical national unity, but instead focus on individual, emotional experience through horizontal space and time, a trend that is further reinforced in the decentralization and proliferation of memorials across the nation.

The last section finally shifts attention to the "profound symbiotic relationship" between religious traditions and institutions and popular culture (397), which leaves both changed. With chapters (arranged in alphabetical order) on Buddhism, Roman Catholicism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Mormonism, Contemporary Paganism and Protestantism, this section comprises a range of traditions "that have been portrayed more often in popular culture, especially in the West" (3). Yet the chapters in this section are even more specifically focused on North American popular culture (occasionally including references to the United Kingdom or to the impact of Indian media on the Hindu diaspora in the United States). A similar bias toward North American media is also noticeable in chapters in the other sections, and while I – reading this *Companion* as a German living in the United States – certainly agree that it is impossible to cover everything everywhere, I am somewhat disturbed by the implicit identification of "popular culture" with "American culture". Chapters on, for example, the representation of Judaism would have looked vastly different if they had been written with regard to German popular culture. Or how about the representation of Islam in popular culture in North Africa? While American popular culture is certainly known and "popular" beyond the United States, it is by no means the only form of popular culture that religion(s) encounter(s). Maybe it would have been more honest to call the volume "Religion and American Popular Culture", then, adding to the chapter on "Definitions" a due reflection on what "American" means, given the heterogeneity and global distribution of its popular culture. In addition, chapters in this section seem to return to a somewhat limited understanding of popular culture as audio-visual, electronic media (as discussed in the first section), with little attention to material culture or space (sections two and three). An exception is provided in Rodger M. Payne's chap-

ter on Roman Catholicism, with sections on the representation of Catholic figures in film, on the identity-shaping impact of the Notre Dame football team, on festivals or festivity as markers of Catholic presence in popular culture, and on the influence of the Catholic imagination on contemporary music.

Mostly using a historical approach that traces the representation of a religious tradition across time (and, sometimes, across different media), the chapters in this section offer interesting insights into the changes of representations and the ways in which traditions align with particular forms of popular culture, such as contemporary Paganism and the fantasy genre. Discussions of traditions that are "other" to the American context, such as Islam or Judaism, note how representations have shifted from simplistic good/bad schemata to more differentiated representations, with the goal described as "normalization", that is, the representation of characters as complex, multifaceted beings, defined not exclusively by their religious identity. Lynita K. Newswander, Chad B. Newswander, and Lee Trepanier's chapter on Mormonism traces the earlier contradictory media representation of a marginalized and often discriminated religious community as paradigmatic of American values such as family and honest and hard work. More recent media representations of Mormons, both in TV reality shows and in the Mormons' own media campaigns, contribute to a change in the public perception of Mormons "from traditional, staid, and white to pluralistic, dynamic, and multi-ethnic" (514), representing diverse sets of values ranging from more conservative to more progressive.

With an interesting twist to this section's overall interest, Clive Marsh's chapter on Protestantism notes that this religious tradition is conspicuously absent from popular media, at least as far as explicit references are concerned. Mostly, Protestant identity is assumed if no other religious affiliation is stated – a move furthered by Protestant resistance to a priestly order and its self-understanding as the religion of the everyday, in addition to the influence that Protestantism has had in shaping (secular) culture. Marsh also notes that where Protestantism is made explicit, denominational differences are usually downplayed to represent a kind of "generic" Protestantism. The recent re-emergence of more specifically Protestant portrayals (for example of denominationally identified clergy) might be due, Marsh speculates, to the decline of Protestant influence on popular culture and a more positive attitude towards specific identities in postmodernity.

While the volume covers vastly different media, spaces and religious traditions, at least two issues appear as central across the different chapters, namely the blurring of boundaries between sacred and profane in encounters between religion and popular culture, and the problem of definitions and how they construct the material with which one engages. Both aspects make the study of religion and popular culture more complex, yet also, I would argue, more fruit-

ful and more relevant in the contemporary context. Most chapters also reflect the increasing awareness of cultural studies that culture is neither stable nor is its meaning inherent to its products, but instead is created in a "circuit of culture", a dynamic meaning-making process moving back and forth between production, representation and reception. Regulation and identity, the two additional moments of the circuit of culture as developed by Paul du Gay and his colleagues, are not explicitly noted as elements in the circuit, but are implicitly treated in a number of chapters, for example, through discussion of the censorship activities of Roman Catholics in the United States or the role of the Internet in shaping religious identities.

Most chapters successfully combine a more general overview (of historical developments, trends in research, or prominent themes) with the in-depth treatment of a particular aspect, adding elements of new scholarship to the summaries of existing research. Occasionally, however, the need for overview and generality leads to an emphasis on description, rather than analysis, something that is particularly noticeable with regard to gender, race and class. While sometimes authors might note gender differences or aspects pertaining to gender – for example the association of fashion with sexuality in the case of women, but not men, in Edward Dutton's chapter on fashion, or the perpetuation of unequal gender ideals in Hindu media in Sheila Nayar's chapter – these observations are rarely subjected to more detailed analysis. However, I realize that we all approach a book with our specific expectations, and not all can – or should – be fulfilled even by an extensive work such as this, and thus these comments should be read as suggestions for further research rather than as criticism of a very fine volume.

In their breadth as well as their depth, the chapters collected here are of very high quality and provide fascinating insights into the many possibilities the encounters between religion and popular culture bring with them, the ways in which this field has been approached by previous research, and possible future directions. Together with detailed summaries at the beginnings of sections and an index that helps navigate the mass of material in this volume, this makes the *Companion* exciting reading material and a useful tool for research both for newcomers to the field and for those who are already engaged in the study of religion and popular culture.