

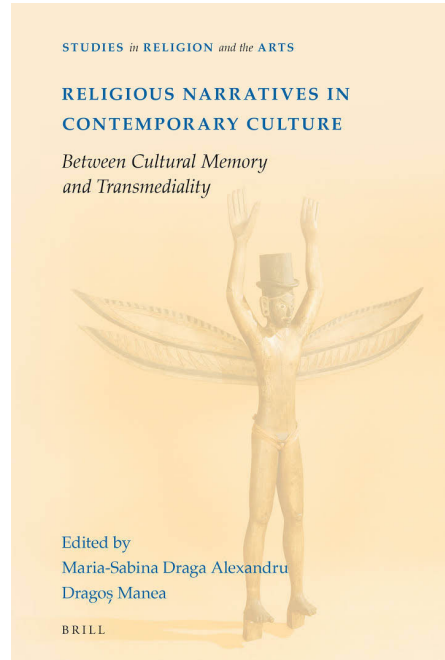
Maria Sabina Draga-Alexandru y Dragoş Manea, eds. *Religious narratives in contemporary culture: between cultural memory and transmediality*. Leiden; Boston, Brill, 2021, x, 220 pp.

Recibido: 14/08/2023 - Aceptado: 15/08/2023

Religious Narratives in Contemporary Culture published by Brill in 2021 and edited by Maria-Sabina Draga Alexandru and Dragoş Manea is an interdisciplinary approach to contemporary western culture influenced by Derridean traces of religion. Authors of various backgrounds explore how these traces are diffused through narratives engrained in the collective memory of the west. These explorations reveal the transformations undergone by religious thinking and practices as they have been transmitted through stories, which in turn have been reshaped by the impact of globalisation and technology.

What strikes the curious peruser in the first place is the tightly knit structure of the thesis, whose enticing arguments are organised into three parts, each made up of three chapters that build solid demonstrations and even arouse a frisson of academic delight.

Following these, the chapters in the first part of the volume look into ways in which religion has been reinvented by confessional aesthetics in the poetry written by Elizabeth Bishop and Tracy K. Smith, by Stuart Dybek's literary remoulding of the bonding force of religion in the Polish American diaspora into secularised patterns, and by Meghan O'Rourke's transformation of the religious ritual into an intellectual practice in her mourning memoir *The Long Goodbye* (2011). In the opening chapter of Part I, Marcel Inhoff argues that, over the centuries, female writers found themselves in the awkward position of "[w]riting from within institutional religion," which "was a blessing and a curse, as it handed the writers a set of tools to construct their indirect confessions, but also ensured



that an institutionally empowered circle of critics would pore over every word" (p. 15). What Inhoff does in the chapter dedicated to the poetry written by Tracy K. Smith and Elizabeth Bishop, respectively, is to build an arc from Bishop to Smith, and show how the poetry written by these two female poets was shaped by "religious writers and sources" (p. 16). In the next chapter, Sonia Caputa explores how "Roman Catholic religion has played a significant role in shaping Polish American ethnic culture because, historically, Poles have identified themselves through Catholicism" (p. 33). This is exemplified by the diaspora culture of the characters in the short stories written by Stuart Dybeck, a third generation Polish American.

Dybek's characters frequent the Catholic church and the tavern. Significantly, when opening the door of the church, the characters "just seemed to enter the medieval ages. There was the smell of incense, and there were statues of saints and martyrs in grotesquely tortured positions" (p. 42), a sense that triggers a change of attitude in these third generation

of Polish Americans, who “observe and participate in religious rituals but are fascinated more with the visual aspects of devotion rather than with the teachings of the Church” (p. 49). Michaela Precup’s chapter, the last in this part, looks into the role of mourning in Meghan O’Rourke’s memoir *The Long Goodbye*, which was written after the author’s mother died of cancer. Precup places O’Rourke’s memoir in a line of memoirs of mourning written by female writers in the United States, but at the same time she argues that “she [O’Rourke] pointedly refuses the paradigm of post-traumatic healing that is associated with healthy mourning, and persistently voices her desire to find a way of bringing her mother back among the living” (p. 54).

The focus of the chapters in the second part is the connection between religious discourses and political systems. The Christian Orthodox religious art, analysed by Maria-Alina Asavei in its role of political and cultural resistance to Ceaușescu’s regime, showcases the peculiar case of communist Romania, where the prevalently orthodox religious orientation of the cultural memory was perversely used by the regime for its own political interests. Arching time and space, the next chapter authored by Olga Solovieva delves into the culmination of the religious rhetoric underlying the theoconservative ideology in the United States in the last five decades. Dismantled, Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), with its suggestion of the United States as Christ’s wounded and bleeding body, is seen as cinematic propaganda, a three-dimensional simulation that served the political purpose of the American administration’s preparations for wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Drawing on the concept of “prosthetic memory” (Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), Dragoș Manea’s chapter “Evil Nuns and Useless Priests” takes us into the world of what Baudrillard called “simulacra and simulation,” i.e. Mike Carey’s *Lucifer* (2000-2006), which follows the biblical fallen angel and most malicious devil of Christianity in his adventures on Earth,

and Steve Dillon’s *Preacher* (1995-2000); two contemporary historical fantasy television series. The genre is brought to attention in the context of the religious narratives in contemporary culture because it foregrounds a negative construction of Christianity, thus catering for the Anglo-American viewers’ secular tastes.

The chapters in the last part look into radical revisions of religious narratives in the posthuman age and their utopian or dystopian projections of the future into transhumanism. The journey in this realm starts with Anthony Miccoli’s “Algorithms of Desire” that tackles cyborgs and AIs, tapping the reader into western perceptions of a Buddhist concept: *dukkha*, meaning “suffering.” Miccoli’s analysis was topical in 2021, of course, but with the very recent release of chatbots, it appeals to our dilemmas and fears with maximum urgency, especially since the author’s exploration of Alex Garland’s *Ex Machina* (2014) and Spike Jonze’s *Her* (2013) reveals that *dukkha* is a precondition for a general AI to connect with humans. Drawing on Donna Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) and a whole league of explorations of binary divisions (Rosi Braidotti’s, Mads Rosendahl Thomsen’s), the next chapter, Maria-Sabina Draga Alexandru’s “How to Fight Historical Violence: Posthuman Spirituality in *Cloud Atlas*” is an exploration of cloning in our posthuman world. Draga shows that cloning does the trick of achieving a posthuman humanity whose status is close to the divine in Wachowskis’ film *Cloud Atlas* (2012), based on David Mitchell’s 2004 novel. In Draga’s view, “[c]loning as a particular kind of human enhancement, ultimately designed as a means of getting as close to perfection as possible (even though often only in certain directions, to the detriment of others), thus also becomes a means to revise divinity” (p. 74-75). Andrei Nae’s closing chapter “Can Artificial Humans Go to Heaven? Transhumanist Salvation in, Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and the *Hitman Series*” questions the possibility of a transhumanist salvation based on Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and its retelling in the *Hitman* videogame series.

Religious Narratives in Contemporary Culture sheds light on the idea that, despite the secularity of our contemporary world, we still participate in a culture irrigated by religious narratives that we have inherited, cherished, transformed, adapted, twisted, revised and even recycled. The editors hope that the debates carried in the volume are relevant to the present moment, which in 2021, when the volume came out, was still a pandemic year. We

live in its immediate aftermath, but no sooner did one concern finish than another has begun: chatboot and the whole context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, with all their promises and perils. By tackling the religious narratives that still shape our contemporary culture, this book raises issues for which we need answers. Reading it will provide us with both inciting interrogations and their virtual answers.

Dana Bădulescu

Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, Romania
dnbadulescu@gmail.com

ORCID iD:<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-4363-2654>