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The Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture

Routledge: London/New York, 2015.

583 pages, € 197,00/ \$ 214.00, ISBN: 978-0-415-63866-1 (hbk), 978-1-315-72447-8 (ebk)

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JOHN C. LYDEN AND ERIC MICHAEL MAZUR (EDS.)

John C. Lyden and Eric Michael Mazur are editors of this volume. Both have acquired expertise in the field of religion. John C. Lyden has written a famous book called *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (New York: NYU Press, 2003),¹ he edited a number of books, such as *Enduring Issues in Religion* (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 1995) and *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* (New York: Routledge, 2009) (cf. *ibid.*) Currently teaching at Grand View University, he deals with Liberal Arts. He is an expert in religion, film, culture and inter-religious dialogue.

Eric Michael Mazur is a director of American Studies while being a professor in Religious Studies Virginia Wesleyan College, USA. Following his PhD in Religious Studies, California he held various positions at the Universities of California, Santa Barbara, California State University, Chico, Bucknell University and currently Virginia Wesleyan College. In his career he contributed to the study of religion by giving lectures, presentations, encyclopaedia entries, articles, book chapters, editing etc. *The Americanization of Religious Minorities: Confronting the Constitutional Order* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) (cf. *ibid.*) is

¹ Cf. Lyden, J.C. and Mazur, E.M. (2015). *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*, Notes on Contributors, John C. Lyden. p. xiv.

one of his well-known books. Besides, he co-authored *Religion on Trial: How Supreme Court Trends Threaten Freedom of Conscience in America* (with Phillip E. Hammond and David W. Machacek, Alta Mira Press, 2004). (cf. *ibid.*) Both editors contributed to this volume by writing articles on their expertise.

This book consists of 583 pages with 28 articles by 31 contributors and is divided into three major parts and the second part consists of three sections. The division of this book is assembled according to three major themes:

1. "Approaching the discipline of religion and popular culture", (p. vii)
2. "Encounters with popular culture" (*ibid.*) and
3. "Religious traditions" (p. vii).

Each part and section of the book consist of an introductory part which summarises the whole section. The great number of articles is justified by the clear overall structure of the volume, which does not only make it easier to look for the relevant article or theme in the book it also systemizes the entire work. Precise details offered by the editors help the reader to understand the quality and seriousness of contributions. Among the authors, one can notice a variety of scholars, ranging from experienced to new comers. Images and tables accompany most articles in the collection and this is helpful. Each article indicates further possible explorations in the field of religion and popular culture. Detailed footnotes and reference throughout the book make it an authentic reference.

The focus of this book is religious traditions in respect to forms of media and cultural encounters in American society. The first introduction, by John

C. Lyden, to the terms used in the title of the volume, gives multiple ways to approach this book. This introduction helps the reader come to grips with the fact that there are no clear-cut definitions of the key terms 'religion' and 'culture'. It also leads the reader to approach the entire collection or pertinent sections of it with an open mind. It lacks the overall ethnographic perspective of religions and popular cultures in other countries. The contribution by Eric Michael Mazur, "Conversations and Confessions: Who's writing about this, and why?" (pp. 21-34) indicates that he is seeking to explain who is studying this field and how it has been proceeding so far. His concluding remark of this article — "students of religion need to pay strenuous attention to them" (p. 31) — explains that he wants upcoming generations to explore religion as a young and large field.

After giving an "Introduction" (pp. 1-4) the first part (pp. 1-34), "Approaching the discipline of religion and popular culture" (p. 5) starts. Part II (pp. 35-396) "Encounters with Popular Culture" (p. 35) is the largest part of this book. This part has three sections:

1. Mediated encounters,
2. Material encounters and
3. Locative encounters.

The first section, "Mediated Encounters" (pp. 37-182), starts by explaining religious traditions in "television, journalism, films, radio, music, video- and Internet games, Internet and social networking and advertising".²

² "Television" pp. 41-46; "Journalism" pp. 65-79, "Films" pp. 80-99, "Radio" pp. 100-114, "Music" pp. 115-136, "Video and Internet Games" pp. 137-153, "Internet and Social Networking" pp. 154-168 and "Advertising" pp. 169-182.

This section is compiled by recognized scholars i.e. Tricia Sheffield, Rachel Wagner, Elijah Siegler, Tona Hangen etc. It presents the relationship between contemporary media and religion, making the case that the choice of media reflects the identity and values of people. One of the drawbacks of this section could be that not all readers are familiar with American media and with certain specific terminology used by contributors. Similarly, religious aspects appear to be completely absent from some articles, such as the one on music (pp. 115-136.)

Section B, “Material Encounters” (pp. 183-312), explains the importance of physical objects for the encounter of religion and popular culture. This section consists of six articles on “popular literature, comics/graphic novels, food and cooking, fashion, games and dolls and Kitsch”³ by Jennie Chapman, Edward Dutton, Benjamin E. Zeller etc. These articles indicate that diversity is an important aspect of American culture. It also illustrates how eating presents a devotional aspect while remaining a form of religion and fashion as “a non-verbal communication” (p. 247). Section C, “Locative Encounters” (pp. 313-396), is the shortest section of this part with four articles named as “shopping and consumption, electronic dance music events, sport and monuments of civil religion”⁴ by Jeffrey Scholes, Garam St. Jones, Darryl Caterine and Sarah Mcfraland Taylor. This section explains the encounter of popular culture and religion in different defined spaces.

Part III on “Religious Traditions” (pp. 397-352) consists of eight articles on practicing religions in American society. The articles are on “Buddhism, Roman Catholicism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Mormonism, contemporary

³ “Popular Literature”, pp. 187-209, “Comics/Graphic Novels” pp. 210-227, “Food and Cooking” pp. 228-245, “Fashion” pp. 246-260, “Games and Dolls” pp. 261-280 and “Kitsch” pp. 281-312.

⁴ “Shopping and Consumption” pp. 317-335, “Electronic Dance Music Events” pp. 336-355, “Sport” pp. 356-377 and “Monuments of Civil Religion” pp. 378-396.

Paganism and Protestantism”⁵ by Clive Marsh, Jodie Ann Vann, Sheila J. Nayar etc. Eight different religions are explained thoroughly in this section in regard to American popular culture by defining their historical and present aspects. It shows the importance of these traditions in the extensive field of religion and popular culture.

As this book planned to explore “religious encounters with popular culture across media, material culture and space while including non-Western sphere Bollywood” (p. 3) it fulfils this plan by illustrating themes such as films, media, games, music, comics, shopping, food, television, sports, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism reflect a distinct and wide range of topics. In most of the articles media (TV, Films, Magazines and Games) is used as a reference point to explain the argument. Besides, a few empirical articles are presented, too. This volume succeeded in depicting a fluid representation of religion and popular culture by highlighting various sides, definitions, identities and explanations of religion and popular culture. This book appeals to students, researchers and the wider public, because this volume shows such a variety in itself. It can be considered a massive contribution to the fields of journalism, media, religion and popular culture. Researchers and students who seek to know more about American society can read this book as a detailed explanation of how various cultures and religions have been surviving or diminishing in distinct American society. Besides, it explains how material and non-material cultures are practiced in several religions and traditions, and how media present them.

With the passage of time, religion and popular culture have been the subject of academics’ debate because of their widespread application in society. The editors of this work proposed that “it can be taken as a source

⁵ “Buddhism” pp. 401-418, “Roman Catholicism” pp. 419-439, “Hinduism” pp. 440-459, “Islam” pp. 460-476, “Judaism” pp. 477-500, “Mormonism” pp. 501-518, “Contemporary Paganism” pp. 519-538 and “Protestantism” pp. 538-552.

of further investigation and discussions” (p. 3) which can be accepted after reading the whole book, whose value lies in presenting such an immense field of religion by covering media, material and non-material culture. It is not advised to compare a volume that comprises various aspects to other books because this book covers numerous aspects and has experienced contributors gathered in one place, which is not easy to find in any other book of this field. The rapid change in popular culture and religious traditions can be rationalized by using this collection as a reference point in coming years, even in historical and comparative approaches. In conclusion, this book is a journey to religion and popular culture in America.

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