

Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2020), 320 pp. \$38 (hardcover), \$17.99 (paperback), \$12.99 (ebook).

Tara Isabella Burton invites readers into an interesting exploration of emerging and growing spiritualities in *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World*. Burton challenges the notion that simplistic narratives of secularization and “falling away” from traditional religions circulated by both New Atheists and Christian fundamentalists explain the complex lived realities of contemporary spiritual experiences. Instead, Burton describes a vibrant religious “remixing” that is combining some traditional religious practices with immersive experiences and communities connected by common interests rather than religious dogma. Burton qualifies as a perfect guide for this journey as someone academically trained in theological studies who has spent several years immersed in some of these cultures herself.

Her journey begins with a visit to the McKittrick Hotel in New York City. The McKittrick offers an immersive experience based on William Shakespeare’s *MacBeth* called “Sleep No More.” The production features vivid recreations of Shakespeare’s characters and settings. The actors interact with patrons, sometimes even making physical contact and, in special cases, engaging in “one on ones” that involve sensual experiences. A culture of diehard fans has grown around the McKittrick and a similar venue in London. These fans sometimes attend on a regular basis, paying premium rates to repeat the experience. Burton views their devotion as more than just immersive role-playing. She believes that their devotion is spiritual and that the McKittrick functions as a churchly venue for the spiritual but not religious.

*Strange Rites* explores numerous examples of these alternative spiritualities that have grown parallel to and even sometimes loosely enmeshed with organized forms of religion. Burton explains that social media has contributed to these movements, making them possible by linking people across vast distances and creating spaces where like-minded individuals can find one another. She credits social media fandom with guiding people to explore their

spiritualities in these spaces. Television shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and book series such as *Harry Potter* launched message boards dedicated to exploring all aspects of people's favorite fictional worlds, including the historical, religious, and philosophical aspects of those imagined worlds. Internet fandom opened the way for people interested in mystical spiritualities or other alternatives to organized religion to find community and tools for spiritual growth.

Remixed spiritual communities run the gamut from the mystical to the physical, from utopian communalism to social activism. Burton highlights the resurgence of magic and mysticism that finds cultural expression in Wicca and other nature religions. Practitioners range from those with communal impulses who assemble in covens to individualistic practitioners whose orientation is more personal, cultural, and commercial. Internet cultures have diversified contemporary Paganism. Burton writes, "Wicca, and New Age spirituality more broadly, have gotten less white and less heterosexual than they were in their heyday" (129). She notes the rise in popularity of Native American and Latino forms of occult spirituality along with the more traditional Norse, Celtic, and Druidic varieties. The world of wellness marks another facet of remixed religious experience. Corporate exercise giants like SoulCycle create a corporatist approach to personal care that combines exercise with a wholistic philosophy of life. SoulCycle convinces people of their need for wellness and manufactures the solutions in the form of exercise equipment and dietary tools.

Burton observes in her conclusion, "We do not live in a godless world. Rather, we live in a profoundly anti-institutional one, where the proliferation of Internet creative culture and consumer capitalism have rendered us all simultaneously parishioner, high priest, and deity. America is not secular but simply spiritually self-focused." (242) That self-focus is energized in Burton's view by disenchantment with institutions who have failed to offer compelling narratives that speak to real lived experiences. Burton continues, "Traditional religions, traditional political hierarchies, and traditional understandings of society have been unwilling or unable to offer compellingly meaningful accounts of the world, provide their members with purpose, foster sustainable communities, or put forth evocative rituals" (242). The failure of traditional institutions, political and social as well as religious, to offer substantial meaning and purpose has left an opening at just the moment when the social and consumer tools for religious remixing are readily available.

*Strange Rites* fulfills the author's promise by offering a vivid, evocative, and crisply written account of spiritual experiences in contemporary America. Burton's concept of religious remixing captures the complexity of a world where old wine often finds a home in new wineskins. Her description of the symbiotic relationship between the spiritual needs of consumers and the tools created by corporate entities to serve them conveys in arresting prose one of the central ironies at the heart of religious remixing. These arguments hold together well, and Burton marshals ample evidence to support them.

She also hauntingly illustrates both the benefits and dangers inherent in some of these new cultures. Outlets that provide healthy community building and human flourishing are also being repurposed for more violent ends. Psychologist Jordan Peterson's rise as an online influencer as well the birth of QAnon conspiracy theories through services such as 4chan and 8chan reveal the moral ambiguity of these tools. While disillusionment with institutions has created opportunity for religious groups previously confined to the margins, it also fuels the growth of movements dedicated to tearing social structures down altogether.

While Burton makes a powerful case for the acceleration of religious remixing as a consequence of the Internet and other digital technologies, that argument does not necessarily explain its origins. What Burton labels as remixing has existed to some degree in every society throughout history where religious and spiritual syncretism was practiced. One could also argue that a form of theological and ethical remixing or syncretism exists within religious traditions and cultures always with individuals holding to a combination of dogmatic orthodoxies and personal interpretations of the tradition. Commercialized and digitized Wicca, for example, finds new forms and a larger reach due to social media technologies, but the revival of witchcraft was fostered in mid-twentieth century Britain and grew in American subcultures through more traditional media in the 1970s and 1980s. The larger social acceptance of contemporary Paganism in America predated and increased simultaneously with the rise of the internet, more correlation than causation. Much like the printing press on the eve of the Reformations, emerging technologies helped accelerate, proliferate, and transform ideas that were already capturing imaginations before their creation.

Burton's main contribution is giving us permission to think of these social and spiritual currents as religious in nature. Recognizing the deeper meanings of fandoms, immersive experiences, and digital

communities for people is essential for understanding the spiritual orientations of humans in our complex age. Burton helps practitioners and observers alike understand that they are meeting fundamental human needs in innovative ways that create new kinds of sacred spaces. *Strange Rites* deserves a wide readership because it is a book that fosters understanding and starts important conversations.

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