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AUTHENTIC FAKES

A Review of *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture*, by David Chidester.
Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. xii + 294 pp. \$50.00 (cloth); \$19.95 (paper).

With the publication of *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture*, David Chidester continues to demonstrate why he is one of the most innovative and important scholars of religion publishing today. The primary thesis of the work is that “religious fakes [phenomena that seem religious but typically are not considered religious] still do authentic religious work” (vii). In the process of demonstrating this claim through a whole range of diverse examples (both very common and sometimes quite obscure), Chidester extends and refines our understanding of religion while also shedding significant light on American popular culture.

While the question of the nature of religion has absorbed scholars for centuries, Chidester also sees an analogous effort going on in popular culture. American society struggles with what counts as religion. It is not always sure. As we divide phenomena between what is religion and what is not, the question of authenticity (about what makes a religion authentic, a human life authentic, etc.) is central. As Chidester notes, “What counts as religion, therefore, is the focus of the problem of authenticity in religion and American popular culture” (9).

To understand Chidester’s interest in popular culture and why he thinks it ought to be investigated by the scholar of religion, one must keep in mind Chidester’s broad definitions of religion. For example:

Religious ways of being human engage the transcendent—that which rises above and beyond the ordinary. They engage the sacred—that which is set apart from the ordinary. And they engage the ultimate—that which defines the final, unavoidable limit of all our ordinary concerns. (1)

In my view, something is doing religious work if it is engaged in negotiating what it is to be human. (18)

Religious symbols, myths, and rituals are resources for merging the first person singular into a first person plural, for transforming any particular "I" into a collective "Us." (24)

[Religion] signals a certain quality of attention, desire, and even reverence for sacred materiality. (34)

Chidester proceeds to illustrate such definitions through wide-ranging and insightful reflections about phenomena in American popular culture. What we find out in the end is not so much that there are certain phenomena in popular culture that are *like* religion, but that religion (both institutional but even more at the level of popular culture) permeates American society. For example, he demonstrates the sacred materiality of Coca-Cola, Tupperware, and U.S. currency. He explains the ways in which baseball, Tupperware parties, and the internet form a collective "Us." He brings to our attention the mechanisms by which transnational corporations like Coca-Cola, McDonald's, and Disney function as religious institutions that do religious work. As he concludes:

If religion is about human identity and orientation, about what it is to be a human person in a human place, even if that place is undergoing dramatic globalizing changes, then cross-cultural business has been doing a kind of religious work through the symbolic, material negotiations over the ownership of the sacred terms and conditions of being human in a human place. (149)

Given the pervasiveness of terrorism as both a legitimate threat in this country as well as a political tool, and given the current U.S. government's role in creating and sustaining war in Afghanistan and Iraq, perhaps the two most powerful chapters in the book are five and six.

Chapter five is a consideration of the role of "sacrificial metaphysics" in American society in general and in the rhetoric and worldview of Ronald Reagan in particular. Chidester argues that Reagan powerfully established (or perhaps reaffirmed) sacrifice as central to American culture. Through both his work in the film industry (for example, in his famous portrayal of George Gipp in the movie about the legendary Notre Dame football coach Knute Rockne) as well as in political office, Reagan "embodied a primal power—like the shaman, like the martyr, like the sacred king—to transform sacrificial suffering and death into life, healing, and redemption" (99). Rather than suffering and death being meaningless, they become both a means to and an expression of our connection to that which is transcendent (America)—that which is beyond any "I" and that represents our collective "Us." Far from being meaningless, suffering and death through sacrifice help to define what it means to be human.

Such a transformation of suffering and death is not unique to Reagan. Indeed, it is quite ordinary in many explicitly religious contexts. Chidester underscores this point by comparing Reagan's use of sacrifice to that of Jim Jones and the mass suicide (sacrifice) in Guyana. For both, "sacrifice is that act that totalizes all the elements of a worldview into a meaningful and powerful whole" (103). A comparison like this might strike most Americans as absurd, but this is part of the charm of Chidester's work. The great differences between Reagan and Jones are set aside for the more illuminating and perhaps important religious similarity. In this way we learn more about both sacrifice as a broad religious concept as well as the great importance it plays in American culture and consciousness. Chidester concludes that "what seemed to be only out on the periphery was also at the center, that the sacrificial symbols in the name of which people die and kill were not only running wild through the jungles but were also securely established in the nation's capital" (110). These sacrificial symbols are important because they gather diverse individuals and help to create a community, an "Us." This is distinctly religious work, either in an explicitly religious context like Jones and his people in Guyana or in a seemingly secular context like Reagan in the nation's capital.

Chapter six examines the ways in which both blood and money function religiously in American consciousness. Chidester provides an exegesis of the American response to the attacks of September 11th as a way of demonstrating this point. He notes that "donating blood and money was the primary symbolic means that enabled ordinary Americans to invest their personal subjectivity in the national collectivity" (128). Americans, of course, gave significantly of their own blood (i.e., dramatic increases in blood banks across the country) and money (millions of dollars raised by various charities that responded with aid to the victims and survivors). These *material* "sacrifices" bound individual citizens into a collective "Us" and to the sacred meaning of the country. In other words, blood and money became sacred materials, deserving of our reverence, that were critical to the religious life of the nation. Chidester concludes that Americans "regarded their donations as a sacrifice, a payment on a sacrificial debt that can never be paid off in one's lifetime because the ultimate payment is one's own life. Acknowledging the sacrifices of victims and heroes, Americans could participate in this political economy of the sacred, refinancing their personal debt by donating blood and money to the nation" (128).

The relevance of blood and money extends beyond simply the U.S. population, however, in that they become important to how the world understands America. Chidester argues that blood and money "are central to the meaning of America in the world" (113). Indeed, the chapter begins with a fascinating account of gangster life in South Africa and how American symbols and slogans (e.g., "In God we trust, in money we believe") have helped to define particular gangs. Our current folly in Iraq surely must confirm further for much of the world the centrality of blood (whether or own or that of the Iraqi people) and money (particularly oil money) are to the U.S. economy – both fiscally and spiritually.

In the end, the reader will be convinced that popular culture “is a medium of negotiation, constantly experimenting with human identity by transgressing, mixing, or scrambling conventional classifications” (220). Thus, popular culture functions religiously. Here we have a broad conclusion about the very nature of popular culture—that popular culture has an inherent capacity for functioning religiously. In addition, Chidester also has shown how “[t]races of religion, as transcendence, as the sacred, as the ultimate, can be discerned in the play of popular culture. As a result, we can conclude that popular culture is doing a kind of religious work” (231). Here we have an important conclusion about the current status of religion: While traditional religious institutions continue to do their religious work, elements of the religious life have been diffused throughout popular culture and thus popular culture has taken on some of the work of religion per se.

While occasionally laboring on some fairly narrow or idiosyncratic examples (e.g., the rantings of New Age conspiracy theorist David Icke), Chidester nevertheless has provided us with an insightful and compelling treatment of religion and popular culture. His book reminds us that some of our most important work as scholars might require us to look out our front doors or at our television screens. By examining more critically the religious nature of popular culture—that culture that is most prevalent in the everyday experience of people—we likely will come to new insights about our popular culture as well as our religion.

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