

Nonetheless, León's central argument that the political spirituality of Chavez created a civil religion through *La Causa* and dramatically transformed society is not contingent upon his discrediting the importance of Catholicism to the movement. This is an important book that will generate much discussion and debate.

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***Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion and Imagined Worlds.* By Joseph P.**

Laycock. Oakland: University of California Press, 2015. xiv + 349 pp. \$29.95 paper.

Joseph P. Laycock has rolled a “critical hit” with *Dangerous Games*, a monograph that describes the New Christian Right's moral panic over *Dungeons and Dragons* (*D&D*). One might dismiss the panic over a mere game as frivolous media overreach by conservative Christian moral entrepreneurs. Through clear, accessible, and painstakingly researched scholarship, however, Laycock demonstrates that the panic emerged from colliding theodicies and reveals deeper strands of American religiosity. *Dangerous Games* argues that the Christian Right's critique of *D&D* was not just that fantasy role-playing games were unwholesome, or even simply time-eating entertainment that distracted from actual religious practices, but rather that *D&D* was a deviant religion, one which had the potential to undermine people's Christian faith. As Laycock argues: “The present study examines the moral panic over fantasy role-playing games in order to explore how fantasy games function as a religion, and, conversely, how religions function like a shared fantasy” (13).

Dangerous Games consists of eight chapters broken down into two parts, as well as a substantial introduction and conclusion. The introduction sketches out the categories of fantasy role-playing games and moral panic by theorizing “the complex relationship between fantasy role-playing games and religious worldviews” (13). Part one, “The History of the Panic,” consists of five chapters that build on the introduction by describing the deep history of fantasy role-playing games, the start of *D&D*, how the moral panic was shaped by a growing fear of cults and the vulnerability of young minds, rumors of Satanism, as well as the myth of the juvenile “superpredator.” Part two, “Interpreting the Panic,” consists of three chapters that explore how

role-playing games create meaning, how the imagination became perceived as dangerous, and how role-playing games offer a rival fantasy to religious worldviews. In the conclusion, Laycock maintains that games allow people critical reflection by exercising their imaginations, “which [function] similarly to a muscle that allows us to shift frames of metacommunication” (280).

Laycock suggests that *D & D* is perceived as a dangerous game for three reasons. First, biblical literalism simply cannot account for the juggling of interpretive frames necessary for the playing of fantasy role-playing games. Laycock argues: “It is when these frames break down and worlds collide that the potential for confusion and danger arises” (279). Second, the worlds of meaning created in fantasy role-playing games are threatening because they imply that religious worldviews might also be imaginative human-constructed inventions. For the New Christian Right “there is a kernel of awareness that religious realities are socially constructed and that strategies must be developed to bury this realization as much as possible” (283). Third, *Dangerous Games* concludes that hegemonic institutions discourage the use of the imagination because alternative views have the potential to think outside of tradition. As Laycock writes: the “alternative worlds imagined during these games have consequences for how players make sense of the real world” (179).

In its most daring thesis, *Dangerous Games* argues that role-playing games resemble religion because they create alternative worlds of meaning that inspire emotional investment on the part of their players. *Dangerous Games* illustrates that when the Christian Right compared *D&D* to religion, they were not simply concerned with content, but also with the experience of gaming itself, which they perceived as a heretical form of religious devotion. In fact, the New Christian Right “claimed that fantasy role-playing games were not only similar to religion but actually *were* a dangerous religious movement masquerading as entertainment” (emphasis in original, 51). As Laycock writes: “fantasy role-playing games produce a surplus of meaning that, at least for some gamers, serves to order the way they think about questions of meaning, morality, and even the supernatural” (75).

Laycock shows that much of the confusion, and cross talk, between the New Christian Right and game apologists, occurred because of a blurring between religion and play. Laycock argues: “The incident was a classic example of a failure to understand frames of metacommunication” (154). Interestingly, however, *Dangerous Games* demonstrates that while role-playing games and religion might be considered “rival fantasies,” that in fact the Christian Right and game apologists hold much in common. Laycock suggests that the moral entrepreneurs from the Christian Right condemned “these games because this is the only way they could enjoy them” (266). Conversely, the moral

entrepreneurs were not completely wrong about *D&D*, and in fact role-playing games *can* be interpreted as a type of religious activity that alters a “player’s worldviews in radical and unpredictable ways” (206).

Beyond the history of the moral panic surrounding *D&D*, *Dangerous Games* illustrates the need for the discipline of religious studies to understand the critical role of play in everyday life. *Dangerous Games* maintains that “both religious worldviews and the worlds of fantasy role-playing games are products of a single faculty through which human beings create meaning together” (180). The realization that a game of the imagination can resemble a religion leads to the suspicion that religion, likewise, could just be an imaginative game. Rather than simply dismissing religion, however, Laycock maintains that we need to “take play more seriously. In particular we should pay attention to the frames of meaning in which these constructed realities occur” (283). As *Dangerous Games* illustrates, both religion and play utilize the human ability to step outside the known-world and look back on it from an alternative and more idealized reality. Besides having a critical function, these fantasy worlds are not separate from the world of daily life, and by giving meaning to prosaic reality, can lead to the re-enchantment and the sacralization of everyday life.

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***A Political History of the Bible in America.* By Paul D. Hanson.**

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Paul D. Hanson’s *A Political History of the Bible in America* is not anything if not ambitious. Its goal is nothing less than to provide an interpretative framework that fosters an understanding and appreciation for the role of religion in American political discourse and societal action, a framework capable of channeling “the cacophony of religious beliefs and moral principles that reside in contemporary society into a rich and productive public dialogue” (20). Hanson wishes his readers to understand the important role religion has played, and continues to play, in creating a virtuous and civil society. He pursues this wish by both providing his readers a historical contextualization of religion’s role in general—and the Bible’s role in particular—in American politics, and by offering a theoretical blueprint for