Ammon Allred
Jenna Soleo-Shanks
Reviewers

Reviews

Handbook of UFO Religions. *Edited by Ben Zeller. Leiden: Brill, 2021, xViii + 542 pp. $239.00 hardback. ISBN: 978-90-04-43437-0. $239.00 ebook. (PDF) ISBN: 978-90-04-43533-7.*

The overview to *The Handbook of UFO Religions* begins with an anecdote and an analogy. The anecdote involves then presidential candidate Hillary Clinton's campaign promise in 2016 to bring more transparency to aspects of the United States' long-standing research into UFOs and extraterrestrial life. The purpose of this anecdote is to underscore "two themes that this text explores: first, the cultural prominence of American ufological folklore . . . within the broader ufological community" and "second, the impact of ufological thought with the broader public sphere" (1). The analogy involves moving from the way in which this anecdote about Clinton functions on a political register to what the handbook intends to accomplish on a religious register. "UFOs have entered political thought // So too religious thought." The paragraph break here suggests a contrast which the text itself (rightly) doesn't respect. The way in which ufology touches on changing ideas about the prominence of science and technology in organizing popular culture, the status of expert knowledge and testamentary knowledge in determining what counts as publicly available knowledge, as well as continued debates over the status of esoteric way of knowing, all of which are taken up in a number of ways in the various contributions to the *Handbook,* imbricate both political and religious thought.

But there are important ways in which framing thinking as "political" or "religious" organizes how we in the academy *talk* about the themes that it presents. When Clinton promised to make certain documents available, it was understood by almost everyone, skeptics and believers alike, that there was something there. The United States government has certainly investigated all sorts of topics related to UFOs and extraterrestrial life, so there will undoubtedly be all sorts of documents related to

that investigation, regardless of what those investigations do or don't turn up. And Clinton wasn't just promising these documents as a candidate - she was vouchsafing them from her position as the ultimate political insider for close to a quarter century by the time of her campaign promise. I don't think it's reading too much into the position of authority here to say that she was being enlisted qua *political* thinker as a *subject* of knowledge. In contrast, I think that we in the academy still often treat religious thought as the *object* of knowledge. The work that we do as academics on political thought *is* itself often taken to be political; but the work that we do on religious thought *ought not* itself be religious - it ought to be scholarly.

The *Handbook of UFO Religions* aims to provide both a comprehensive and in-depth overview of that scholarship, and in this it largely succeeds. After a very helpful but comparatively dense introduction to "The First Seventy-Five Years" of "Scholarship on UFO's and Religion," the *Handbook* is divided into five parts. Even so, it seems to me that a more basic leitmotif structures the book around the dichotomy between reckoning with ufological discourse in the context of existing religious traditions versus using ufology as the impetus for new religious movements. Part One is explicitly concerned with the first part of this dichotomy: it looks at discourse about UFOs within major established religious traditions, with sections on the Vedic tradition, Judaism, Christianity and Native American religious and spiritual traditions. Parts Four and Five explicitly take up the phenomena of new religious movements in both an American (Part Four) and global (Part Five) context. And while Parts Two and Three organize themselves thematically instead (Part Two dealing with general themes such as ancient aliens, alien abductions, conspiracy theories and the interplay between science and religion and Part Three with specific case studies that are illustrative of these themes), I'd argue that these sections still largely revolve around the dichotomy posed by the adaptation of existing religious traditions versus the development of new religious traditions.

The first two chapters in Part Three, Christa Shusko's "A Martian God: Eleanor Kirk's Extraterrestrial Epiphany in *The Christ of the Red Planet*" as well as Stefano Bigliardi's fascinating "Of *Polenta* and *Elohim*: Mauro Biglino's 'Ancient Aliens' between Anti-Religion and New Religiosity" are particularly illustrative of the underlying epistemic framework of this dichotomy. In both cases, new forms of knowledge, whether esoteric as in Shusko or techno-scientific as in the case of Bigliardi can present themselves as a kind of revelation that either reinforces (Shusko) or challenges (Bigliardi) religiosity as traditionally understood. In either case, transcendent categories of experience are immanentized. This immanentization gives rise to new forms of religiosity, but these new forms are still knowable to the scholar of religion as religious to the extent that they continue both to be illustrative of as well as to further develop ways of interacting with the world that are properly religious. Whether what I'm calling here the immanentization of transcendent categories of experience ought to be taken, to follow Bigliardi's way of formulating the dilemma, as "anti-religion" or a "new religiosity," might largely be a function of the self-understanding embedded within the figures and movements being discovered. Take the phenomenon of ancient aliens. What moves Biglino's [not Bigliardi's] thesis about the presence of ancient aliens in the Bible from being anti-religious to being religious in a novel way is his own changing sense of the implications of his thesis. There's a fine line between debunking a text and reinterpreting it.

A similar dilemma shows up in virtually all of the many contributions that take up the ancient alien phenomenon, albeit in different ways depending on the relevant context. Discourse about ancient aliens strikes very differently when it's being used by a religious fundamentalist movement to bolster its political control over the second most populous nation on Earth (as is disussed in Layne R. Little's "Vimāmas and Hindu Ufology") than when it's being used as part of an historically racist discourse that attempts to deny the authenticity of indigenous American (as is discussed in Paul O. Myhre's "Aliens Among North Americans?") or African material culture, largely on the grounds of its sophistication. In all these cases, the authors (rightly, in my view) cease simply treating the traditions and movements being discussed as scholarly objects of knowledge and treat them instead as interlocutors, actively intervening in ongoing religious discussions.

That are also political discussions. What makes the *Handbook of UFO Religions* valuable isn't just that it sheds light on a host of contemporary movements that are interesting in their own right, but that it both documents and participates the myriad of fascinating, compelling, bizarre, problematic and disturbing ways in which we are all attempting to square our cultural, political and social traditions with the rapid changes in our understanding of the universe, and the place of one short-lived species on one tiny little planet within it.

—Ammon Allred
University of Toledo

The Oberammergau Passion Play: Essays on the 2010 Performance and the Centuries-Long Tradition. *Edited by Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co. Publishers, 2017. 204 pp. $39.95 Softcover. ISBN: 978-0-7864-9603-7.*

Once a decade for nearly 400 years, the Bavarian village of Oberammergau has produced "the world's most famous Passion Play," an event that involves more than half its residents and has attracted millions of spectators over the centuries. Part of the tradition's fame comes from its unique origins: in 1633, with a deadly plague raging throughout the region, Oberammergau's civic leaders prayed for God's mercy and vowed to perform a *Passionspiele* every ten years if the town was spared. It is said that once the vow was taken no further deaths occurred. The Oberammergau Passion Play, thus, is not mere theater; it is a sacred and communal event that is inextricably bound to a place and its people. Yet, by the end of the twentieth century the tradition was almost as well-known for its antisemitism as anything else. As James Shapiro explains in *Oberammergau: The Troubling Story of the World's Most Famous Passion Play* (2000), the narrative itself was specifically anti-Jewish, an aspect that was praised and promoted by Hitler. Shapiro's book documents the town's efforts to address and correct the problematic aspects of the tradition leading up to the 40th production of the play in the year 2000. It's a study that ends on an ambivalent note, in part, because at that time significant questions remained about the tradition moving forward.

The Oberammergau Passion Play: Essays on the 2010 Performance and the Centuries-Long Tradition picks up, in many ways, where Shapiro leaves off. And there is plenty to say. As editor Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr. notes in his introduction, while the 2000 production sought merely to remove antisemitic elements, the 2010 *Passionspiele*

debuted an entirely new script focusing on the Judaism of Jesus. Contributors to the collection attended the 2010 production and their experience of the new version provides useful context for their work. The volume, however, is not merely a report on the 2010 event. Employing a range of theoretical perspectives and offering far-ranging comparisons, the collection attempts to analyze the complex and often paradoxical aspects of the *Passionspiele* focusing on the important changes made to the 2010 production. The thread that ties many of the essays together is the question of how the 2010 *Passionspiele* functions within a centuries-old Christian tradition that, according to Wetmore, "defines the village to this day" (3).

The Oberammergau Passion Play: Essays on the 2010 Performance and the Centuries-Long Tradition is thoughtfully organized into three sections. "Part One: Oberammergau 2010 Responses" includes three essays that analyze fundamental aspects of the 2010 production. Glenn Ehrstine's stimulating essay, "The Role of Their Lives, or Jesus on a Bike: Oberammergau on Stage and Off" uses Richard Schechner's theory of two-fold audience reception to analyze extra-theatrical components of the *Passionspiele* experience (like seeing the actor who plays Jesus ride his bike between performances), and argues that such interactions are essential for the Oberammergau tradition – a "ritual theater that has become dislodged from its original cultural context" (18) – to maintain its efficacy. The next two essays focus on the interreligious aspects of the production. In "What's a nice Jewish boy like you doing in a Catholic play like this?": Oberammergau 2010 and Religious Identity," Wetmore explores the decision to reframe the character of Jesus as a Jewish man in 2010, focusing on the tradition's history and potential future in an increasingly multicultural Germany. In "Dialectical Aesthetics of Change and Continuity in the 2010 Oberammergau Passion Play," Sharon Aronson-Lehavi compares the *Passionspiele* to other examples of interreligious art and argues that the 2010 production does more than simply layer Jewish references onto the Christian traditions, but rather integrates the two using nuanced aesthetic elements that allow for a more complex cultural and theatrical experience. "Part Two: Comparative Oberammergaus" offers four essays. Joshua Edelman compares his experience of the 2010 event with tourist narratives from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in "Spiritual Voyeurism and Cultural Nostalgia: Anglophone Visitors to the Oberammergau Passion Play, 1870-1925 and 2010," revealing how the *Passionspiele* functions as a fascinating hybrid of faith culture, heritage, and commerce. David Mason and Kevin Wetmore offer comparative studies of Oberammergau's tradition against Indian and American traditions, respectively. Mason ("Tableaus and Selves in Vrindavan and Oberammergau") posits that the *Passionspiele's* non-mimetic nature is best understood in comparison to Indian devotional theatre, while Wetmore ("Oberammergau in America / America in Oberammergau") provides a history of American Passion Plays, including summaries of nine traditions representing every region of the country and spanning most of the twentieth century, focusing on how such traditions either emulated or deviated from the Oberammergau model. In "Atemporality in the Heidelberg Passion Play, the Passion Play of Oberammergau and Sarah Ruhl's *Passion Play: A Cycle*", Jutta Eming explores the complex ways in which time functions in three different "passion plays" and offers compelling conclusions about the phenomenological impact of such traditions on audiences that are diachronically distant from the original events. The final section of the collection offers two interviews: Frederik Mayet, the actor who

played Christ in the 2010 production, interviewed by David Mason and an interview with Sarah Ruhl by Jill Stevenson. While the Mayet interview provides an interesting window into what it's like to play Christ, with references to ideas considered in several of the other essays in the collection, the interview with Ruhl expands on some of the most interesting themes of the collection – audience reception, theatre as commerce and community, and the issue of religion on stage – in a discussion of her 2005 play *Passion Play.* The collection concludes with editor Wetmore looking forward to the future of the tradition in the essay, 'Conclusion: Forty-Second in the Twenty-First: Oberammergau 2020.'

The Oberammergau Passion Play: Essays on the 2010 Performance and the Centuries-Long Tradition is admirable for the range of analysis it offers despite the narrowness of its subject matter – a single production of singular theatrical tradition. While the 2010 production of the Oberammergau *Passionspiele* is arguably unique enough to warrant this consideration, there are a few issues with the collection that are worth noting. Firstly, while each essay is intelligent in its own analysis and argumentation, the fact that each offering rehearses the same points of history and historiography becomes tedious, especially when reading the collection as a whole. Editor Kevin Wetmore acknowledges as much in his introduction, suggesting that "despite any repetition or overlap […] the essays form an intertextual discussion that creates a much more complex portrait of the village and its play than any one essay could." (9). As a reader I wish the editor did more to eliminate such redundancies and streamline a text that becomes unnecessarily dense at points. (Having multiple contributions from the same author also suggests that some streamlining might have been possible.) My only other issue with the collection is one that no editor could have anticipated, but from the vantage point of a reviewer in 2022 is impossible to ignore. *The Oberammergau Passion Play: Essays on the 2010 Performance and the Centuries-Long Tradition* exists as a response to a single production in 2010 and concludes by looking ahead to the next scheduled production in 2020. Of course, we know now that the 2020 production could not happen due to the global Covid pandemic. (Oberammergau postponed the *Passionspiele* until 2022). While it is certainly not a fault of the editor for not predicting the confluence of the Passion Play and plague in 2020, it is certainly ironic that this collection analyzes so many facets of the Oberammergau tradition except its connection to plague. One could only wonder how the contributors might have reconsidered their subject matter in light of the changes to our world since the outbreak of Covid. Perhaps there is even more to say about the Oberammergau Passion Play as the tradition emerges on the other side of this twenty-first century plague.

— Jenna Soleo-Shanks
University of Minnesota-Duluth