
BOOK REVIEW

Zeller, Benjamin E., ed. 2001. *Handbook of UFO Religions*. Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill. xvii + 542 pp. ISBN: 978-90-04-43437-0 (hbk). €199.00.

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Throughout history, people have reported seeing strange phenomena in the skies. Modern interest in Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs) traditionally dates to 1947, when American aviator Kenneth Arnold reported seeing a number of flying disc-shaped objects near Mount Rainier, Washington. Academic scholarship linking UFOs with religion commenced around the same time and attracts scholars from a wide variety of interdisciplinary fields. The *Handbook of UFO Religions*, edited by Benjamin Zeller, is the latest contribution to the academic study of ufology and religion. The book, which consists of over five hundred pages, comprises an introduction and twenty-four chapters, divided into five parts. In the introduction, Zeller orients the reader by highlighting some of the key patterns that emerge in UFO scholarship and which unite the eclectic chapters in the current volume. Reoccurring themes include scientism, millennialism, occultism (in particular, the role of Theosophy) and synergies with popular culture. Following this is an excellent chapter by W. Michael Ashcraft which summarizes the first seventy-five years of academic research.

Part 1 (Religious Engagement with UFOs) focuses on the intersection of ufology and major religious traditions. Layne Little contributes a fascinating chapter (replete with beautiful colour illustrations) on *vimanas*, the divine flying chariots referenced in the Vedas and Sanskrit epic literature. He demonstrates how three interconnected threads of discourse—Theosophy, Hindu nationalism and “ancient astronaut” theories—contributed to the idea that mythical accounts of deities may actually be referring to extraterrestrial encounters. David Halperin explores similar themes in his chapter on Judaism and the vision of Ezekiel, which ancient astronaut theorists have claimed was an encounter with a UFO. Joseph Laycock considers the links between “conservative evangelical ufology”, demonology and the “inter-dimensional hypothesis”—the idea that UFOs are more likely to be an experience of psychic or interdimensional phenomena than visitors from another planet. He explores the (literal) demonization of UFOs and highlights how the intersection of Christianity and ufology represents a unique example of “mainstream religion” hybridizing with “paranormal discourses” (p. 104). Finally, in his chapter “Aliens Among Native Americans?” Paul Myhre posits that Western outsiders have used “alien intervention” theories as a way to account for examples of Native American ingenuity and creativity such as pictoglyphs, petroglyphs and earthworks.

Part 2 (Methods and Themes) consists of four chapters that focus on methodology. Olav Hammer and Karen Swartz open the section with their chapter on ancient alien mythology, a modern form of folklore which posits that the gods of various religions were actually extraterrestrial beings who visited Earth in the distant past and brought with them advanced technology that helped to shape human civilizations. Following this are David Robertson's chapter which explores the connections between ufology and conspiracy thinking, Erik Östling's chapter on abduction narratives as emergent folklore, and Rafael Almeida's chapter on UFO conferences as key sites where ufologists constitute themselves as a collective. A major limitation of this section is that it overlooks important contemporary sources and sites of ufological activity such as podcasts, social media (particularly #UFOTwitter and Facebook groups) and apps (for example, CE5 Contact). Part 3 (Individual Proponents) presents the biographies of four UFO popularizers. It is difficult to reduce the ufology milieu to four individuals and while the chosen characters (Eleanor Kirk, Mauro Biglino, Benjamin Creme and Raymond W. Bernard) certainly provide interesting case studies, there are many more prominent, and arguably more influential, figures who could have been included in this section.

The final two sections discuss new UFO religions emerging from the American context (Part 4) and the global context (Part 5). American UFO religions covered include Scientology, The United Nuwaubian Nation, Brotherhood of the Sun/Sunburst, Heaven's Gate and the Unarius Academy of Science. A highlight is Susannah Crockford's chapter, which derives from her brilliant book *Ripples of the Universe: Spirituality in Sedona*, and looks at "Star-seeds"—people who, while not necessarily affiliated with any UFO religion, believe they are an alien consciousness inhabiting a human body. Global UFO religions covered include The Valley of the Dawn, the Aetherius Society, the Raelian movement, Kōfuku no Kagaku, and a variety of East Asian UFO religions (discussed in Lukas Pokorny's chapter "East Asian UFO Religiosity"). These case studies draw attention to the role of aliens as purveyors of spiritual messages and demonstrate how ufology can be considered a subset of the cultic milieu—a space conducive to the formation of folklore, myth and new religious movements.

The *Handbook of UFO Religions* is a rich resource for those interested in the historical origins of the UFO phenomenon and its intersection with religion. However, despite the volume's massive size the coverage is not exhaustive. Zeller suggests that this is due to a dearth of scholars in the field; however it would have been valuable to include, for example, perspectives from academics working in the areas of anomalous experience and "the phenomenon". Other topics that are overlooked include the contemporary techno-scientific connection between ufology and religion, the burgeoning UFO social media community, and the relationship between UFOs, new age spirituality and psychedelics. Finally, given the latest developments in the field (most notably the recent United States government reports and congressional hearing) and the re-branding of UFO to UAP (unidentified aerial phenomena) the scholarship in this book already feels as though it is situated in a "pre-disclosure" era. It will be interesting to see how academic approaches to religion and ufology develop now that government leaders and scientists appear to be taking the issue seriously whereas previously it sat on the margins of respectability. Nonetheless, the *Handbook of UFO Religions* is an important and timely contribution; it offers an excellent historical context and many points of departure for future research in this space.