

Review article

Materializing creationism in the United States

BIELO, JAMES. *Ark Encounter: the making of a creationist theme park*. x, 223 pp., illus., bibliogr. New York: Univ. Press, 2018. £20.99 (paper)

TROLLINGER, SUSAN L. & WILLIAM VANCE TROLLINGER JR. *Righting America at the Creation Museum*. 327 pp., maps, illus., bibliogr. Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2017. £17.50 (cloth)

In 2007, the Creation Museum opened in Petersburg, Kentucky, having taken seven years to construct, at a cost of \$27 million. Nine years later, a forty-five-minute drive away in Williamstown, also in Kentucky, and with production costs of over \$150 million, Ark Encounter – a full-scale theme-park reconstruction of Noah's Ark – was completed. Both were produced by the fundamentalist Christian organization Answers in Genesis (AiG) to promote its literalist and anti-evolutionist reading of the Bible. To this end, as both books under review amply illustrate, the Creation Museum and Ark Encounter employ state-of-the-art exhibition techniques to construct imagined scenes from the Bible, supporting such claims as that the world was created by God in six days, that dinosaurs lived alongside humans, and that pairs of all species (including dinosaurs) were saved in the Ark as the flood engulfed the rest of the world. To date, the two enterprises have collectively received several million visitors and have generated millions of dollars in revenue, if not yet as much as their production costs.

Righting America at the Creation Museum by Susan L. Trollinger and William Vance Trollinger, Jr., and *Ark Encounter* by James S. Bielo provide a fascinating insight into each of these 'materializations' of the Bible by AiG. They do so, however, with different analytical framings and associated methodologies, and with markedly dissimilar takes on how we might regard them and similarly politically freighted institutions.

As the title of *Righting America* implies, Trollinger and Trollinger frame the Creation Museum primarily within the attempt by AiG to set America on what it sees as the morally correct path and more broadly as part of Rightist politics in the US. This is a politics in which 'the Christian Right has become the most reliable and perhaps the most important constituency within the Republican Party' (p. 6), at least to such an extent that no candidate for the 2016 Presidency was willing to publicly state a belief in evolution. To examine the museum, the authors (a professor of English and of History, respectively) draw on a range of approaches, 'including religious and political history, museum studies, visual rhetoric, argumentation, biblical studies, and history of science' (p. 14), to ask the following questions: 'What is the message of the Creation Museum? How does the museum convey this message to its visitors? ... How (in conveying this message) does the museum constitute its visitors as Christians and Americans?', and 'What does all this mean for American religion and politics?' (pp. 13–14).

The result is a detailed and illuminating analysis that explains the rise of the Christian Right and its factions, especially that of AiG, with its insistence on reading the Bible literally as well as with its focus on evolutionary theory as a target and source of what it sees as moral corruption. Careful attention is given to the forms of argumentation deployed by AiG, with ample acknowledgement of the fact that the Creation Museum does not simply 'materialize' its own

version of the Creation but also presents an apparently ‘multi-perspectival’ account in which scientific views are included – though only to be shown as erroneous and leading to depravity, as in its rhetorical coupling of Darwinian evolutionism with slavery and Hitler. The authors’ attention to the detail shows how the visual strategies deployed by the museum variously make allusive links to, or skate over, potential logical problems in its (and AiG’s) own position. For example, while there is an insistence on literalism in relation to the earth having been created in six twenty-four hour days and being ‘fewer than ten thousand years’ (p. 71) old, there is no claim that it is flat, and, indeed, the museum includes contemporary representations of the universe as evidence of God’s skill.

While the museum sometimes draws on modern science to its own ends, its central message is that the word of God should be simply accepted and that doing otherwise has led to the debauched state of the contemporary world, which is ridden with sins such as children being born outside wedlock, drug-taking, homosexuality, and pornography. As Trollinger and Trollinger point out, there is virtually no mention of Jesus in the Creation Museum, and nothing about forgiveness. Rather, the message is of an impending judgement day, in which believers will be saved and the rest will perish, as in the earlier flood. As they conclude, the museum is a ‘mainstream Christian Right institution … [that] joins with a host of other Christian right organizations in seeking to shape, prepare, and arm Christians to be aggressive and uncompromising culture warriors’ (pp. 234–5).

Ark Encounter, another AiG production, might be seen as a further weapon in this disturbing moral arsenal. James S. Bielo, however, presents a more agnostic and even benign picture – one with which the Creationists themselves would surely be pleased. A social anthropologist, he was granted access to parts of the assembly process, doing fieldwork in the design studios, for appointed day-length visits of varying frequency for more than three years. This leads, as he writes, to his deep appreciation for … [the] years of preparation and planning, … the work of countless decisions both large and small … for how cultural producers will invest significant time, energy, and creativity in even the smallest of details’ (p. 61). He gives much illustration of this, depicting the work of those ‘primarily responsible’ (p. 64) – astonishingly, just four people – for the design of the massive (100,000 ft²) enterprise, all of whom have had to ‘affirm a “statement of faith”’ (p. 62) to AiG principles. What surprises Bielo most about what he witnesses is that the designers draw readily on the strategies of popular culture, and that there is ‘very little spiritualizing of the work’ (p. 78), despite the fact they see themselves as ‘co-creators with God’ (p. 68). The overwhelming emphasis in what he observed was, rather, on the

evaluation of possible ideas for the design in terms such as ‘fun’ or ‘boring’, ‘inviting’ or ‘distracting’, ‘appealing’ or ‘confusing’, ‘interesting’ or ‘simple’; or, their most frequently used term of praise, ‘cool’ (p. 78).

While Bielo shows how Ark Encounter deploys techniques from popular entertainment to ‘materialize the Bible’ (p. 32) by producing what is intended to be a highly compelling, immersive experience, unlike Trollinger and Trollinger he does not see it as his task to examine the nature and politics of the beliefs being conveyed. We are thus left with an account in which the ‘creative creationists’ are just like any other group – except insofar as they are more skilled than many – that mobilizes the power of contemporary media to its own ends. The lists that Bielo includes of increasing numbers of other such ventures to create Christian fundamentalist themed experiences, albeit mostly on smaller scales, in the United States and elsewhere is thus presented as evidence of a turn to drawing on medialized opportunities rather than as what Trollinger and Trollinger would surely see as a deeply worrying expansion of the capacities and reach of reactionary ideas.

Reading these two books initially left me with concerns about social anthropology: whether being granted access for fieldwork and making an anthropological commitment to try to see the point of view of those being studied compromises critical evaluation. In many ways, what Bielo does is what has long been a hallmark of the discipline, namely to present the local view without making moral judgements. Yet in his decoupling of techniques of presentation from the content and politics of the beliefs themselves, he in effect takes those beliefs less seriously than do Trollinger and Trollinger, as well as leaving himself less to work with when analysing the deployment of entertainment techniques themselves. While one can appreciate that Bielo would not want to repeat arguments that others have made elsewhere, in a world in which the fundamentalist Right is seeking modes of legitimization – and in an ethnography that is concerned with how they do that – the way such an ethnography itself might support such legitimization, and the politics of what is being legitimated, must surely deserve very careful reflection. Anthropological reflexivity, and willingness to follow connections, could, surely, have led to an account that coupled the insights of ‘behind the scenes’ with the kind of understandings that *Righting America* brings.

Alongside reading these books, I took a look at the websites of the Creation Museum and Ark Encounter.¹ The point made by both books, that these institutions are professionally produced, with much emphasis on entertainment, was abundantly evident. However, seeing advertisements for events such as one called ‘Sacred: Answers for Women’, which explained its aims

as follows: ‘Transgenderism, homosexuality, pornography, and premarital sex are all attacks on our Creator, who made our bodies to be a beautiful, sacred temple of the Holy Spirit. How do we respond biblically to this war on sexuality?; put the images of smiling visitors at the ‘family friendly’ exhibits depicting how ‘God sent the global Flood to judge the evil world’ in a disturbing light. Anthropology should surely not gloss over or methodologically side-step such a sinister threat. Both *Righting America* and *Ark Encounter* do an important job of putting these increasingly influential

institutions under the spotlight. They do so, however, with different degrees of illumination, shadow, and consequence.

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NOTE

- ¹ <https://arkencounter.com> and <https://creationmuseum.org> (accessed 29 May 2019).