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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Ark Encounter: The Making of a Creationist Theme Park* by James S. Bielo

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Source: *American Religion*, Fall 2021, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Fall 2021), pp. 110-112

Published by: Indiana University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/amerreli.3.1.06>

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BOOK REVIEW

James S. Bielo, *Ark Encounter: The Making of a Creationist Theme Park* (New York: New York University Press, 2018)

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It seems a lifetime ago when creationism was the biggest thorn in the side of public science education. The old fundamentalist-modernist skirmishes, played out in brick-and-mortar courtrooms, schools, and churches, seem almost quaint compared to the toxic controversies and conspiracy theories traversing the ether today, dangerously eroding public confidence in scientific institutions and expertise. But if, in an age of radical denialism and paranoia, creationism has lost some of its media buzz, it has achieved something far more privileged: normalization. Despite their aversion to evolution, Christian creationists have evolved from culture warriors to cultural producers, deftly weaving secular technologies and aesthetics together with a religious ideology that infuses everything from textbooks and museums to entertainment media and amusement parks. Gauging such productions requires that we look not only at how creationists advance fundamentalist ideals but how they transform them as well. New ministry strategies bring new practical, procedural, and ethical concerns, especially when some of these strategies draw legitimation from sources that are considered less than “holy.”

James Bielo captures just such a dynamic in *Ark Encounter*, his ethnography named after the centerpiece of a creationist theme park in northern Kentucky.

American Religion 3, no. 1 (Fall 2021), pp. 110–112

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With his usual penetrating insight, Bielo documents the creative process behind the construction of a “full-scale” realization of Noah’s ark, funded by the Answers in Genesis Creation Museum. Standing at a length of 510 feet (converted from biblical cubits), the 100 million dollar ark is a multimodal, immersive environment, a monument to modern “edu-tainment,” complete with animatronic displays, reproductions of living spaces and ancient nautical technologies, a live petting zoo, gift shops, and a zipline ride (situated, fortunately, outside the ark).

Most of Bielo’s fieldwork took place before the park’s official opening in 2016 and focused on the daily labors of a small team of creative professionals, including artists and production designers with backgrounds in secular entertainment. The team members were all committed Christians and creationists themselves. They also shared in common a principled determination to beat the world’s major culture industries at their own game. Working from modest cubicles and storyboards, the team embodied an ethos of corporate perfectionism, a studied commitment to achieving the highest professional and technical standards of their respective fields, in service of what Bielo calls “devotional consumption.”

Among the key interventions of this book, Bielo highlights the inadequacy of “religion versus science” as a primary framework for making sense of creationist enterprises such as the Ark Encounter. To be sure, we cannot ignore the movement’s efforts to cast doubt on evolutionary science, or their attempts to co-opt scientific inquiry in order to do so. Indeed, Bielo spends nearly an entire chapter analyzing one exhibit in which ancient “dragon legends” are presented as proof of the historical co-existence of humans and dinosaurs before and after the Genesis Flood. But even here we see that in the process of taking dinosaurs, those cherished mascots of secular science education, and repackaging them as emblems of a Bible-centered “heterodox past,” creative creationists invoke “the strategies and imperatives of modern entertainment,” conjuring legitimacy through symbolic, affective, and sensory cues as much, if not more, than through logical propositions or appeals to biblical faith. By demonstrating that contemporary tensions between religion and science are bound up in complex and intimate entanglements of religion, science, and entertainment, Bielo adds considerable depth and nuance to our understanding of a politically fraught field of historical representation and contestation.

In a world where knowledge is power, but fun is everything, the Ark Encounter team set out to create a commercially viable experience, an immersive, multisensory environment along the lines of the best Hollywood films and Disney theme parks. While obsessively attentive to matters of historical and biblical “authenticity”—a work ethic, Bielo notes, fueled by a desire to reconnect with the origins of Christian faith—these creationist “imagineers” (as they called themselves) are like generations of evangelists before them who recognize that the success of the

Gospel depends on not only the integrity of the message but also the extent to which its worldly mediations are in accord with prevailing standards of plausibility, which are often matters of taste perhaps even more than abstract belief and reason.

Bielo thus contextualizes the Ark Encounter as but the most recent and extravagant example of what he calls “materializing the Bible,” a modality of evangelical devotion and proselytism found across multiple domains of Christian practice, old and new. As the basis for a wider exploration of the “transmedial” nature of biblical scriptures (www.materializingthebible.com), as well as a forthcoming book, Bielo’s conceptualization reminds us that sites of Christian place-making, such as theme parks, biblical recreations and reenactments, and public gardens, are not peculiar anomalies, as detractors might wish to believe, but part of an enduring tradition in which “the written words of scripture are transformed into physical, experiential, and choreographed environments.”

Ark Encounter offers a unique, in-depth glimpse at the “backstage process” of evangelical cultural production, along with a strong critical analysis of the resulting “poetics of faith” on display in the immersive, multisensory environments of the Ark Encounter and Creation Museum. But the value of this ethnography goes beyond the fascinating case study at its center. The troubled landscape of American religious and cultural pluralism has never simply been a battle of competing truths or identities. It is a space of strategic, creative, and even playful interventions in the literal physical landscapes and sensoria of our lives.

James Bielo achieves something very important by demonstrating so vividly that ideological authority is mediated as much through materiality as through rhetoric and performance, and that, in building apparatuses of authority, religious actors rely on more than their theological imperatives and partisan loyalties alone. As Bielo describes it, they incorporate sources of professional and creative inspiration from other cultural orbits, including corporate capitalist aesthetics of entertainment and imagination, which have never been more aligned with public norms of plausibility. This argument serves not only as a reminder that Christian fundamentalists appropriate and engage with popular culture. It also reminds us that the symbolic cues we respond to, which lead us to grant legitimacy to one source of information over another, appeal to our senses in ways that reflect our collective conditioning as modern consumers.