

*UFOs, Conspiracy Theories and the New Age.* By David G. Robertson. Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. 246 pages. \$102.60 cloth; \$35.96 paper; ebook available.

David G. Robertson's book offers a welcome new perspective on the significance of the UFO in the Anglophone world and the different meanings that these symbolically resonant objects have assumed in the post-Cold War period. Using the methodology of discourse analysis, he examines the UFO as a "discursive object" that takes on specific meanings in both New Age (or, as he prefers, popular millennialist) and conspiracy theory milieus. Robertson argues that as individuals involved with popular millennialism became interested in UFOs and, following that interest, encountered conspiracist material, a new kind of genre, which he calls "millennial conspiracism," began to emerge. Simultaneously a genealogy of UFO narratives, a history of how the New Age optimism of the 1960s gave way to a darker form of millennialism, and an examination of three prominent proponents of millennial conspiracism, the book is an instructive example of the social constructionist approach within religious studies.

Robertson finds that because it represents the shifting frontier between scientific knowledge and more subjective ways of knowing, the UFO is a key element in the discourse of millennial conspiracism, which combines the conspiracist focus on the malevolent influence of hidden agencies (such as the Illuminati, New World Order, or reptilian extraterrestrials) with more positive themes of personal and planetary transformation drawn from popular millennial narratives. The second half of Robertson's book traces the development of this evolving form of discourse over time, as evidenced in the works of Whitley Strieber, David Icke and David Wilcock, three popular authors whose claims draw on epistemologies stigmatized by established religious and scientific authorities.

Robertson's use of discourse analysis and his focus on the epistemological foundations and "epistemic capital" associated with different kinds of discourse distinguishes his book from others in the burgeoning literature on extraterrestrial contact, alien abduction (or contactee) narratives, ufoism, and UFO religions. It is aimed particularly at scholars in the field of religious studies, Robertson's own discipline, and models an alternative approach applicable in many other contexts. Focusing our analyses on discourse and epistemology, Robertson argues, rather than problematic analytical categories like "belief" (which has been subjected to thorough critique in recent decades) would enable scholars to "more easily consider the functional similarities between 'religious' discourses and those of 'nationalism,' 'political ideology,' and so forth" (211). From this perspective, conspiracy theories, UFO narratives, and

popular millennial literature spring from the same source and serve the same social functions as those narratives deemed “religious.” The difference is that they lack the latter’s authoritative status or, as Robertson puts it, epistemic capital.

In the hands of a less competent writer, all this talk of “epistemic capital,” “counter-epistemic strategies,” “discursive objects,” and “millennial conspiracism” easily could devolve into jargony mumbo jumbo or theoretical blather. Robertson, however, handles it with grace and an economy of style that facilitates understanding. He brings in just enough discussion of his terms and their theoretical foundations, such as Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* or Foucault’s understanding of power, to be edifying without overwhelming, and his explanations are clear and succinct. Moreover, he rarely loses sight of his own objectives, continually reminding the reader of how these theoretical concepts illuminate his own material. The book’s first three chapters focus on methodological and theoretical issues while later chapters offer more description and ethnographical observations.

After laying out the organizing themes of the book in chapter 1, Robertson explains the method of discourse analysis and defines his key concepts in chapter 2. This chapter, which is the methodological heart of the book and the place where Robertson articulates his contribution to religious studies most explicitly, ends with a brief overview of the five epistemic strategies or knowledge systems currently used in contemporary Anglophone culture: tradition, science, experiential, synthetic, and channeling. As Robertson explains, these epistemic strategies sanction particular ways of knowing and produce different types of knowledge and each has a different degree of authority within a given context. Although it draws on all five, millennial conspiracism tends to privilege the last three strategies, which, because of their high degree of subjectivity, Robertson classifies as counter-epistemic.

Chapter 3 examines the shifting significance of UFOs in different discourses, charting transformations in how UFOs were conceptualized in relationship to military, political and historical contexts including the post-World War II era; the Cold War and the growing paranoia of McCarthyism; the space race of the 1950s; and the social transformations of the late 1960s. He examines the shift from a physicalist understanding of UFOs as actual military weapons or spacecraft to more spiritualist interpretations of UFOs grounded in Theosophy and its offshoots, concluding that by the mid-1980s, UFOs tended to be seen through either a conspiracist discourse of government secrecy or a popular millennial discourse of benevolent spiritual transformation.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 turn to Strieber, Icke and Wilcock, each of whom has built their reputations by exploiting the margins between scientific and more subjective ways of knowing. Here Robertson’s close attention

to these men's lives and careers gives these three chapters a different feel from the first half of the book and the book's larger thesis tends to get lost in a welter of biographical and ethnographic information. However, a brief final chapter enables Robertson to draw the threads of his argument back together. What unites Strieber, Icke and Wilcock—and millennial conspiracist discourse more generally—he concludes, is an appeal to alternative sources of knowledge gained through direct contact with some supernatural being or force. Thus, what distinguishes millennial conspiracist epistemology is “*a broadened conception of what counts as knowledge*” (205, italics in original). The UFO is the “perfect symbol” of this counter-epistemic epistemology, since it “seems to offer proof that the hegemonic epistemic strategies of science and tradition are insufficient in themselves to explain the discursive object” (205).

The struggle to wrest epistemic capital from institutional authorities, whether religious or scientific, or to mobilize counter-epistemic strategies is one that unites various fringe movements and Robertson's model of discourse analysis offers religious studies scholars a productive way to account for these movements while sidestepping the definitional debates, unreflective use of emic categories, and boundary policing that currently hampers the field. Furthermore, as Robertson notes, discourse analysis exemplifies the “methodological agnosticism” critical for the comparativist project of religious studies, which demands that scholars treat *all* claims about supernatural agents as equally suspect, whether those claims belong to an established authority like the Catholic Church or to the millennial conspiracists (“nutters” as some jokingly refer to themselves) who flock to Strieber's Dreamland festival or Icke's arena-size seminars. With its concise prose and engaging style, Robertson's book offers not only a compelling analysis of contemporary millennialism, but an equally compelling model of critical rigor.

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*Reincarnation in America: An Esoteric History.* By Lee Irwin. Lexington Books, 2017. 474 pages. \$130.00 cloth; ebook available.

At the beginning of this large, engrossing, and informative book, Lee Irwin claims he is not concerned with proving or disproving the various reincarnation theories he describes, but with investigating their effect on the communities and individuals who believe in them: “Thus, this is not a book about religious systems of belief in the afterlife as much as an exploration of how such beliefs have contributed to spiritual development in the persons and communities that embrace