

SEBASTIAN EMLING and KATJA RAKOW, *Moderne religiöse Erlebniswelten in den USA. "Have Fun and Prepare to Believe!"* (Berlin: Reimer Verlag, 2014), 266 pp.

Can spirituality be expressed through "modern religious experience worlds?" The answer is in the affirmative. Are religions, when marketed to appeal to broad audiences, inevitably watered down? Not necessarily. The volume documents the outcomes of the DFG-funded project "Moderne religiöse Erlebnisgesellschaften" at the Institute for Religious Studies at the University of Heidelberg and is the first publication in the new book series *Transformierte Religionen*. The authors, Katja Rakow and Sebastian Emling, present their field research of two key evangelical organizations in the U.S.: the Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, and the Creationism Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky.

Lakewood is currently the biggest neo-pentecostal megachurch in the U.S., attracting over 43,000 people to its seven services each week. In 2005 it moved into a former basketball arena with 9,000 parking spaces, an auditorium featuring 16,000 seats and a huge stage framed by two artificial waterfalls, providing space for a choir, orchestra, and three big screens. Aided by over 4,000 volunteers, the church is headed by Pastor Joel Osteen—the so-called "Smiling Preacher" (Washington Post, January 2005) and "a religious specialist and entrepreneur on the American market of religion" (10)—which also makes the church the site of his eponymous and (inter)nationally broadcasted TV-show. In turn, Lakewood serves both the local and the (inter)national community (96-103). As Rakow comments, the structure and atmosphere of the building is deliberately left neutral and reminds her more of a conference venue than a church (11). A similar observation about the lack of resemblance to a church is made by Emling, who compares the Creationism Museum to a shopping mall (15). Within the first five years since its opening in 2007, the museum has attracted over five million visitors and is led and financed by Answers in Genesis (AiG) with Ken Ham serving as its president. AiG is the most influential and successful American Young Earth-Creationism organization, a Christian-apologetic body with over 300 employees, its own monthly magazine (*Answers*), and over 900 international radio stations (121). The 6,200m² complex located at Interstate 275

features not only the museum, a cafeteria, and book and souvenir store but also outdoor facilities such as a lake and a petting zoo.

Taken together, the authors make three crucial claims and thereby revise scientific and common preconceptions of evangelicalism especially held by Europeans: First, against the tendency to portray them as hard-liner, conservative fundamentalists who denounce modern technology¹, both authors present evangelical organizations as heterogeneous, complex, adaptive, and innovative religious providers on the competitive American religious marketplace. Second, by positioning themselves against the "text-only" religious scientists (49-67), Rakow and Emling convincingly argue that religions bind their members through an effective interplay of cognitive, affective, and sensual impulses. Both institutions are described in detail (location, facilities, design, worship services, exhibits, workshops, media used) as "modern religious experience worlds" which compete on the market and deliberately use medial, material, and aesthetic forms of presentation as strategies to both recruit and bind (new) members as well as to convey their religious doctrines. Third, the authors contend that by presenting religion as a multi-media, multi-sensual experience it is not—as some scholars such as Mara Einstein, Richard Cimino and Don Lattin suggest—"watered down" depriving it of its ability to empower.² Hence, providing German readers with a survey on contemporary US-Evangelicalism is both timely and warranted.³

¹ See also Michael Hochgeschwender, *Amerikanische Religion: Evangelikalismus, Pfingstertum und Fundamentalismus* (Frankfurt a.M.: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2007), 249-250. On the heterogeneity of evangelicals Donald W. Dayton, Robert K. Johnston, *The Variety of American Evangelicalism* (Knoxville, TN: U of Tennessee P, 1991); George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1991).

² Richard Cimino/Don Lattin, *Shopping for Faith: American Religion in the New Millennium* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998), esp. 55-75; Mara Einstein, *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), esp. 137.

³ See also Rahel Gersch, *Frommer Individualismus: Die Lakewood Church und die*

After a short introduction (9-29) the study is divided into four parts: part I synthesizes the scholarship on the economics (30-48) and praxeological-aesthetics of religion (49-67),⁴ especially the studies on the religious use of modern technologies in constructing “brand narratives” (a field that is currently cultivated by many scholars across the academic disciplines),⁵ and theoretically situates the study in relation to previous research on megachurches, televangelism, and creationism (69-84; 114-22).⁶ In particular, as their terminology throughout the book reveals, the authors draw upon the works of James Twitchell who views the rise of megachurches as the epitome of branding in religion.⁷ The main body of the study (parts II and III) offers an in-depth analysis of the branding strategies (economics) and the material dimension (aesthetics) of religion of both organizations.

Phänomene Megachurch, prosperity gospel und charismatische Pastorenschaft (Berlin: WeißenseeVerlag, 2013). So far, no German book on the *Creationism Museum* has been published.

⁴ Christian Ellinghoff, *Ökonomische Analysen der Religion: Theoretische Konzepte und rechtspolitische Empfehlungen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2005); Ellen F. King, *Material Religion and Popular Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010).

⁵ Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 2004); Birgit Meyer, “Religious Sensations: Why Media, Aesthetics, and Power Matter in the Study of Contemporary Religion,” *Religion: Beyond a Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries (New York, NY: Fordham UP, 2008), 704-23.

⁶ Steve Bruce, *Pray-TV: Televangelism in America* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1990); Anne C. Loveland, Otis B. Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch: A Material and Cultural History* (Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P, 2003); Francis Harrold, Raymond Eve, John Taylor, “Creationism, American-Style: Ideology, Tactics and Rhetoric in a Social Movement”, *Culture of Creationism. Anti-Evolutionism in English-Speaking Countries*, ed. Simon Coleman, Leslie Carlin (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 67-84.

⁷ *Branded Nation. The Marketing of Megachurch, College Inc., and Museumworld* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2004), esp. 47-108.

The last part (IV) introduces three short case studies of religious organizations for comparison: the Creation and Earth History Museum in Santee, California, as well as two denominational megachurches, the Skyline Wesleyan Church in La Mesa, California, and the Second Baptist Church in Houston, Texas.

The findings are based on the two authors’ field observations through participatory observation and interviews with responsible employees and visitors. Unfortunately, it remains unclear which guidelines the collected data follow (e.g. amount, length, standardized questionnaire, undercover research). Moreover, since interviews with worshippers in the case of Lakewood are mostly missing, it falls short of analyzing the “consumer’s” take on the offered religious “product” which, in this case, leaves the third crucial point of the study (religion is not “watered down”) open for discussion. In a similar vein, while following Clifford Geertz’s model of “thick description” allows a detailed microanalysis of these organizations, the analysis at times remains too descriptive. Especially with regard to a German audience, more context would have been helpful. For example, while the emergence and development of the religious marketplace in the U.S. is explained (43-48), the German readership might struggle with situating the discussed megachurches on the current religious marketplace. Additionally, this has led to some redundancies in each chapter which is at times tiring for the reader when, for example, the central message of the Creationism Museum—“the history in the Bible (beginning in Genesis) is true, thus the gospel (the message of salvation in Jesus Christ) based in this history is true” (Ken Ham)—is quoted three times in one chapter (on pages 186, 190, 210).

However, leaving these criticisms aside, the study presents a wealth of findings and offers an eloquent account with an innovative approach. The authors skillfully paint the picture of both organizations as market-oriented, multi-media institutions. Conceptualized as a “Full Service Church”⁸ (Lakewood Church) and as an “All-Inclusive Provider” (Creationism Museum), both offer various services beyond their customary functions like concerts, child care, workshops such as “Snakes Alive” (139-40) and adventure tours like “Dinosaur Digs” (136) (both offers of the Creationism Museum) as well as advisory ser-

⁸ Twitchell, 81.

vices such as Lakewood's "Women's Ministry Workshop" (176-80). In turn, religion becomes a transsectoral element touching upon every aspect of life (127, 185, 253). These so-called "seeker-friendly" services are designed to target the "unchurched" (74), i.e. the religiously disaffected, and form a core part of the organization's respective brand narratives in order to position themselves on the market as independent and attractive "faith brands" with a unique profile.⁹ For instance, while Lakewood is one of over 35 megachurches in the Houston area alone as well as part of the "World of Faith" movement and the broader self-help discourse (68-84), it presents itself as a distinctive institution: Its history is presented in line with the prosperity gospel as the epitome of the American Dream beginning with a small community of Christians in a poor neighborhood which has within 50 years risen to be the greatest megachurch in the U.S. led by two generations of pastors of the Osteen family (84, 95). Its slogan "Oasis of Love in a Troubled World" (88) presents Lakewood as the center of healing which stands out against Houston's Second Baptist Church's central message as the "Fellowship of Excitement" (243-45). Moreover, unlike the Second Baptist Church, Lakewood has no denominational marker in its name and has few exterior and interior Christian markers. In a similar vein, though its church service includes religious elements, its "seeker church liturgy"¹⁰ with its high share of contemporary Christian Rock & Pop music and a so-called "message" of hope (instead of the traditional sermon) increases its entertainment value (152-65). Thus, Lakewood leaves Christian semantics and theological dogmas as a backdrop (not "watered down" but as a kind of "reduced theology"?)¹¹ making its religious reading optional in order to attract new visitors. In this gradual process of missionizing, the degree of involvement of new visitors gets more intense once they decide to participate

in the various workshops and bible study groups (100, 110-11, 182).

At first glance a seemingly different, and yet at a closer look quite similar, picture emerges when compared to the Creationism Museum which takes a Biblical literalism to the Genesis creation narrative and rejects scientific theories of evolution. In contrast to Lakewood, the museum is decidedly Christian-creationistic in its brand narrative and presents the universe and life as originating from divine acts of creation. Its mission is to religiously educate the public (which according to AiG is in a state of moral crisis (133)) in order to return to a Christian foundation because only a literal study of the bible will stop young adults from turning away from churches which currently fail to convey the Christian message (124-33).

Yet, while portraying itself as a unique Christian company which offers the intellectual foundation for Christian missions of churches and other organizations, AiG is non-denominational. Moreover, like Lakewood, it employs a gradual rapprochement to convey its message in order to win over new members, especially families, through its official motto "Have Fun and Prepare to Believe" (see the sub-title of this volume), as well as through the combination of learning and entertainment. In particular, by blending cognitive and sensual impulses, AiG uses sensory contrasts of aesthetics for visitors to experience the "absence of God" (195-97) and to make the "Bible come alive" (Ham, 221). For example, the first station of its core exhibition, the "Seven C's of History" (Creation, Corruption, Catastrophe, Confusion, Christ, Cross, Consumption), is the tranquil and comforting atmosphere of Garden Eden (200-04) which among other things features a five-meter-high waterfall with Adam and Eve presenting the beauty and perfection of God's work. Animal sounds, artificial wind, Bible quotes through speakers, and information boards complement the scenery creating an impressive design which stimulates the visitor's auditory, visual, haptic, and cognitive perceptions. Afterwards, the visitor is led to the "Cave of Sorrows," a dark, small, and sound-filled room showing the "sin of Adam" which is intentionally designed as an inversion to the harmony of Garden Eden and is experienced, as Emling's visitor interviews attest, as the most hostile place of the museum (204-07).

Both institutions, the Lakewood Church and the Creationism Museum, combine cogni-

⁹ Twitchell, 25; Einstein, 86-92, 122.

¹⁰ Kimon H. Sargeant, *Seeker Churches: Promoting Traditional Religion in a Nontraditional Way* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2000), 64.

¹¹ David Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1997), 20.

tive and “sensational forms”¹² to present their teachings as multi-sensoric experiences. Their respective architectures, the components of the worship services and exhibitions, the use of music, light, and video turn both into “modern religious experience worlds.” However, while similar in their overall structure, they differ in their Christian semantics as well as their stance on the use of modern technologies: Lakewood affirms its use as a desired means to convey its religious message (239) whereas AiG views this as a necessary but undesirable means needed for evangelization but not as part of the religious experience itself (130, 137-39, 219-22). Interestingly though, as Emling’s interviews attest, the museum’s self-portrayal does not match its actual perception since its visitors view their sensual experiences not as a preliminary step but as a core part of the religious transformation (205).

Overall, this is a multifaceted study which raises the issue of how much we overlook

when looking at religion only through text. The book demonstrates the importance of theories of economics and aesthetics of religion for the analysis of religious organizations and communities—though, especially with regard to the more general title, the question of how other U.S. religious traditions face the challenge of maintaining loyalties on the competitive religious market would have been well worth a discussion. This being said, the authors conclusively demonstrate that the mediation and marketing strategies of contemporary evangelical organizations sell religion as multi-sensual mass events addressing both the faithful and unchurched. While remaining “conservative” in their doctrines they use innovative techniques of communication and organization to popularize evangelicalism—having fun and believing certainly does not contradict itself.

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¹² Meyer, 707.