Jacques Vallee and John Keel, who extensively discussed the spiritual and folkloric roots of UFO narratives. Strieber, however, says of UFOs that “I am not so sure that the conclusions that the objects are spacecraft and that they are piloted by aliens—which are universally believed in the UFO community . . . are correct” (72). Here, Strieber engages in broad and inaccurate generalization—shown to be such by Kripal’s (and occasionally his own) discussion of theorists like Vallee and Keel.

Despite such deficits, Kripal and Strieber’s clear and vivid writing make this an engaging and thought-provoking book and, while it is aimed at a general readership, I believe it would work well in the undergraduate classroom, particularly as the subject of a critical analysis.

Aaron John Gulyas, Mott Community College


This important essay collection was inspired by the Canadian Parliament’s consideration of the issue of polygamous immigrants in 2015 with passage of the Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Practices Act. This act bans the entrance of polygamists into Canada and “allows for their deportation if they engage in polygamy while residing there” (7). The editors lay out an ambitious agenda. The collection traces the history of plural marriage and its contemporary practice in Canada, America and abroad; explores the issue of decriminalization; and, proposes best practices in the regulation of plural marriages by the state. Contributors bring methods and theoretical frameworks from a broad range of disciplines, including sociology, history, law, and economics.

Several questions run through the collection: What effect would the decriminalization of plural marriage have on traditional American and Canadian marriage norms? If plural marriage was decriminalized, what would the impact be on women and children? And, what do we know about the consequence of polygamy among other religious populations of the world, its relationship to violence and to other social ills? The final section of the book considers an array of issues that must be addressed by the state if it attempted to regulate plural marriage.

Anthropologist Janet Bennion introduces us to the history of Mormon polygamy, its practice by fundamentalist groups since the turn of the twentieth century, and provides valuable insights into its practice by men and women in the modern world. Bennion’s own research with the United Apostolic Brethren and with other key groups, provides an important inside view on how plural families work, how women make meaning, form relationships, and raise families in the confines of plural families.
In “The Variable Impact of Mormon Polygyny on Women and Children,” Bennion suggests there are seven predictive factors that characterize “poor-functioning polygamy.” These include: 1) illegality; 2) geographic isolation; 3) socioeconomic inequality; 4) male supremacy; 5) economic deprivation; 6) absence of female networking; and 7) the presence of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse (62). Importantly, she argues, “Successful polygynous families are not so because of a particular positive trait but because of a lack of . . . negative traits” (64).

Sociologist Lori Beaman analyzes the 2010 British Columbia Polygamy Reference which asked the Supreme Court for an opinion on the way the law against polygamy might be interpreted and enforced. In this proceeding, the court heard testimony from scholars, legal experts, and participants. According to Beaman, “On this basis, the court decided that the provisions of the Criminal Code of Canada that render polygamy illegal do not violate the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms” (13). Beaman challenges these assumptions, however, beginning with the court’s core objective that it would “protect monogamy for the good of society” (42) and analyzes the content of the themes that framed the debate.

Beaman finds flawed the assumption that women’s equality was the status quo, and instead argues that, “women’s equality is far from real or achieved. This observation is important because much of the antipolygamy discourse positions itself as being on the side of women, and particularly as championing women’s equality” (44). She argues, instead, that women’s equality and equality before the law have not been accomplished, and indeed, the patriarchal structures of Canadian law and society are complicit in this as well. “Othering” those who practice and preach a plurality of wives and assuming that the opposite point of view is a tidy, moralistic and monogamous center obliterates a closer and ultimately more beneficial examination of what fails women in both.

In “Ethics of Sisterhood: African American Muslim Women and Polygamy,” religious studies professor Debra Majeed asks why some African American Muslim women are attracted to polygamous marriages. Majeed sees the way larger cultural perceptions create a condition where polygamy prevails—the perceived shortage of good men, higher status of men involved, and the opportunity for women to obtain resources they might not have access to otherwise.

Shoshana Grossbard provides an economist’s perspective on polygyny by charting the negative impact of polygyny on family units and society by looking at what demographic patterns and economic metrics tell us about broad systems and patterns. Her conclusion articulates her thesis, namely that, “Because of the high value of women in marriage markets in polygamous societies, men’s incentives to control women by way of political and religious institutions, such as early arranged marriages, will increase” (15). What is particularly important about this chapter is the web of

Nova Religio
relationships and impacts it projects that center on marriage as a core institution of society not only tied to culture but also to economics, politics, and the perpetuation of values and beliefs.

A particular strength of this collection is the disciplinary breadth of the approaches and methods used by the authors. For example, Rose McDermott and Jonathan Cowden analyze the causal relationship between polygyny and violence and “document at least eighteen discrete negative consequences that are all statistically significantly correlated with increases in polygyny rates” (117). These factors include girls less likely to be educated, women having more children, lower female life expectancy, marriage at younger ages, and more likely to die in childbirth. “As long as polygyny persists, countries run a high risk of violence” (139). The authors interpret Mormon polygamy as reinforcing patriarchal values and structural systems rather than seeing it as a way to empower women, perpetuating monogamous family values in the process.

Law professor Maura Strassberg recommends a more nuanced approach to criminal prohibition by focusing on the characteristics of Mormon fundamentalist polygamy that limit agency and impact negatively a woman’s ability to freely choose to enter or exit a plural marriage, and engage in broader society. She recommends focusing on “polyfidelity,” or the choice for a married couple to connect with partners beyond their core relationship in committed relationships, so that the state might develop more open systems that give room for women to have greater opportunity for education, choice, and agency over their lives. Strassberg suggests that the state’s methods and legal structure for dealing with those involved in new marriage forms is outdated.

Besides the significant and widespread harm to women, men and boys are also negatively impacted by polygamy, for example, surplus men and boys are ostracized, among other things, damaging the quality of their lives. Gender roles reflect social and religious ideas about difference in the nature of men and women and hold women responsible for the “taming” of men, rather than holding men accountable for what is sometimes bad, damaging, or violent behavior.

This book builds on existing scholarship about Mormon polygamy to situate it in a broader legal, social and cultural theoretical context, capitalizing on new research and methods and providing insights based on the lens of multiple disciplines and fields. The contributors differ in their views about decriminalization and whether it would result in an improved condition for women and children. Some argue it would result in greater scrutiny, while others suggest that the structural, economic and political effects will damage the lives of the individuals involved and the society around them, regardless of the legal atmosphere which sustains it. All of the arguments serve to illuminate ongoing debates over polygamy.

Martha Bradley-Evans, University of Utah