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UFO RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

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Few new religious movements of the post-World War II era are more fascinating, or cast a more interesting light on American society, than those associated with UFOs (unidentified flying objects, also called flying saucers). Some observers, to be sure, stoutly rejected the notion that these objects were of religious significance, and held only to scientific investigation of the phenomenon. But, valid as that perspective may be, the religious interpretation of UFOs has tended to overwhelm the scientific in the minds of both aficionados and the general public, and is our present concern. The alleged visitors from outer space quickly took on the role of spaceborne saviors—or else became stock demonic figures. Even when not explicitly intended, the UFO experience easily slipped into the folkloric or mythological characteristics usually associated with supernatural entities. In this respect UFOism acquired attributes of a religion in formation—although it may be added that the formation process never really “jelled” into any substantial liturgical or institutional shape.

The modern UFO movement commenced June 24, 1947, when Kenneth Arnold, a civilian pilot from Boise, Idaho, flying over the Cascades in western Washington in search of a lost Marine C-46 transport, reported seeing nine shiny objects in a chain-like formation speeding by at some 1600 miles per hour. “They flew,” Arnold said, “like a saucer would if you skipped it across the water.” Seizing on the

term “flying saucer,” the news media picked up the story, and it was published worldwide. Here began the modern myth of flying saucers and UFOs. Although scholarly commentators compared the apparition to the “foo fighters” of World War II, the mysterious airship widely reported in the America of 1896,¹ and to even earlier accounts of puzzling aerial phenomena from medieval, classical, and Vedic sources, Arnold’s account launched a thousand new sightings.

They poured in from around the world, and quickly acquired elaborations. Viewers saw both saucers and cigar-shaped “mother ships”; UFOs caused cars to stall if one swooped too close; in January 1948 an Air Force pilot, Thomas Mantell, died in a plane crash as he was pursuing a UFO over Louisville; in 1952 a fleet of UFOs launched a celebrated radar-traced “invasion” of Washington, D.C. Debunkers, of course, countered the enthusiasm with prosaic explanations, and by the early 1950s UFOs were widely portrayed, at least in the newsmagazines and by editorial cartoonists, with a light touch. But serious believers also tracked the occult aircraft; they saw the enigmatic objects as precursors to what could be the greatest event in human history: contact with an extraterrestrial race. Furthermore, there were prophets—or, in the preferred term, “contactees”—among them who claimed that epochal contact had already been made, and by them.

For the contactees and their believers, UFOs clearly possessed a revelatory significance that can only be termed religious. As we have noted, while UFOs have been the focus of scientific and quasi-scientific investigation, they have also, for some, found a religious role well summed up in Carl Jung's phrase, "technological angels."² One may observe a similar schism between "scientific" and "religious" responses to identical phenomena in nineteenth-century Spiritualism. For a religious interpretation of clairvoyance and mediumship one looked to the Spiritualist church and its parallels; for a scientific inspection of the same phenomena, to parapsychology or psychical research. This is one clue that, as we shall argue, nineteenth-century Spiritualism and twentieth-century UFOism belong in the same category.

According to Jung, the UFO visitants have, in a "space age" nurtured on science fiction, played the part once taken by descending gods, angels, saintly apparitions, and heavenly saviors. Mysteriously appearing out of the heavens, they have contacted favored earthlings to deliver messages of warning, hope, or forthcoming apocalypse, and to impart philosophical wisdom. The demonic role is also there, for not all UFO beings are benign. There are accounts of the sinister "Men in Black" who allegedly harass observers of UFOs, and harrowing tales of interstellar abductions and assaults climaxing in bizarre medical procedures or even cosmic rape.

I also put religious UFOism alongside Spiritualism on the grounds that it is essentially a new popular religion of the same type. Both presuppose an order of spiritually significant beings between the human and ultimate reality, with which one can have conversational and disciplic relationships. Whether spirits or space brothers, interaction with them opens up a sense of expanded consciousness and cosmic wonder, quite apart from whatever words are actually communicated. In both there are physical phenomena or "traces" which serve to support belief, but which for real believers are like "signs" in a religious sense, promoting salvific faith, as well as producing anomalies to be investigated scientifically.

For both Spiritualism and UFOism, human commerce with the Others begins with the experience of elect individuals. In both, this privileged exchange soon enough becomes the focus of informal "circles" or even minor institutions, in which messages from the invisible friends are transmitted mediumistically, in trance or through automatic writing. But at the same time, in both, these groups tend to be loose and ephemeral. For interest to be sustained, they need powerful periodic injections of fresh visions or novel messages.

UFOism may have other affinities as well. We must also note links with "Teaching Spiritualism" and Theosophy, discussed elsewhere in this book. Gordon Melton has devised the useful term "Teaching Spiritualism" to refer to mediumship or, in the more recent term, to "channeling," which does not so much emphasize passing on communications from departed relatives and the like as transmitting instruction from highly advanced spiritual teachers.³ Some of the wise among the extraterrestrials clearly fall into the "Teaching" role, and their wisdom tends toward Theosophical concepts like karma, reincarnation, and spiritual evolution, though sometimes with more of an apocalyptic edge than their older fellow-initiates would have thought fitting. Yet parallels to the universe of Theosophical masters obtain in the concept of an adept who is not simply a god existing by aseity from all eternity, but who has attained high cosmic rank by dint of effort, initiation, and acquired wisdom.

Some commentators have also perceived a remarkable similarity between UFOs and their occupants, and the traditional fairy-folk amply affirmed by generation after generation of European peasants. Jacques Vallee, in *Passage to Magonia*,⁴ pointed to striking convergences between the two otherworldly "little men" beliefs: the round saucer traces on the ground like fairy rings, the elven or goblinesque appearance of the alien intruders, the abductions during which ordinary time dissolved as it did for those countrymen of yore taken into a fairy mound, the new/old whispers of "changing" children and queer half-human pregnancies.

More recently Thomas Bullard, in an article widely considered among the very best treatments of UFOs as a cultural phenomenon, has argued that the social role of UFO belief strongly suggests folkloric parallels, while UFO abduction reports "give rise to an emotional response and coherency of narratives that suggest in strongest terms the impact of an experience"; whether that "experience is subjective or objective" is beyond the power of the folklorist to prove.⁵

The first and most famous of the contactees was George Adamski (1891–1965). A "metaphysical" teacher in the 1930s and by the late 1940s employed by a hamburger stand on the road to the famous Mt. Palomar observatory in southern California, Adamski claimed to have seen squadrons of UFOs after the Arnold sighting. Then, in late 1952, he met a UFO occupant from Venus, Orthon, on the Mojave Desert. This was reported in a popular book, *Flying Saucers Have Landed* (1953), coauthored by the British occult writer Desmond Leslie. In it, and in subsequent books and lectures, Adamski portrayed the extraterrestrials as very much like humans though more beautiful and of a greatly advanced civilization. In a New Zealand lecture, the contactee spoke loftily of Venusian culture and religion (a "science of life" without temples), and their desire to communicate with us, at least "through our minds." "But they say earthmen are so preoccupied with our own thoughts we are unable to receive impressions when they do send them." On Venus, however, religion is conveyed in educational institutions rather than churches, has to do with the power of mind over the body and relationships with the cosmos, and is put into daily rather than weekly practice.⁶

Other celebrated UFO contactees of the fifties offered broadly similar stories, though claiming visits to different planets. Truman Bethurum (1898–1969) also encountered by a flying saucer on the Mojave Desert, though in this case the vehicle was from Clarion, a paradisaical world with no war, divorce, or taxes; it was described in *Aboard a Flying Saucer* (1954). Orfeo Angelucci

(1912–?), perhaps the most spiritual of the early contactees, pictured hauntingly beautiful and mystical outer-space worlds in *The Secret of the Saucers* (1955). Daniel Fry (b. 1908), in *The White Sands Incident* (1954), reported a ride in a flying saucer from White Sands, New Mexico, to New York and back, during which time a spaceman named A-Lan explained to him that the visitors were from an ancient earthly civilization that had been destroyed by atomic warfare, and were now contacting their former homeland to warn of the grave danger we were courting with our rediscovery of nuclear power.

Many observers, in fact, proposed that the saucerian mythologies of the early fifties can be understood as antidotes to the tensions of those immediate postwar years of cold war, fervent anticommunism, and the threat of nuclear holocaust, and yet at the same time reflecting some lingering utopianism from the thirties and the wartime dreams. However opportunist most of the professional contactees may have been, the response they garnered could well have been linked to the message they gave. The world, they suggested, can be better, we can overcome poverty and war and understand one another, the dream can be recovered, and there are friends here to help us, friends as up to date as the technological wonders that have brought us to this pass.

An important gathering place of contactees of this type and their following was the Giant Rock Spacecraft Convention, held in the shadow of a huge boulder of that name on the Mojave Desert annually from 1954 to 1977 under the leadership of George Van Tassel (1910–1978), entrepreneur of a small airport and himself a contactee from 1952 on. At their height the conventions drew thousands of people, believers interspersed with a few curiosity-seekers, who camped out, listened to one contactee speak after another, looked for sightings, and exchanged views and literature.

The majority of the fifties contactees were content with structures as vague but benign as their messages; there was little more than books, lectures, and very loose

groups of friends and supporters. A few tried for more. Daniel Fry created Understanding, Inc., an organization that, with some sixty chapters in its heyday, served as a platform for many saucer-related speakers. Gabriel Green (b. 1924), who in 1962 received over 171,000 votes in the California Democratic primary for U.S. senator on a radical ban-the-bomb platform, had established the Amalgamated Flying Saucer Clubs of America in 1957. This was an informal but active network during the sixties for the exchange of contactee news and views. Green claimed some contacts himself, and claimed to be a "telepathic channel for the Space Masters and the Great White Brotherhood—the Spiritual Hierarchy of Earth." His expressions suggest the rapidly emerging connection of UFOism with mediumistic Spiritualism and Theosophical language.

That connection was reinforced in several other early UFO groups. Early in the 1950s, the Heralds of the New Age, which originated in New Zealand, sent out literature of the same type. In the United States a young woman of psychic ability, Gloria Lee, established the Cosmon Research Foundation to aid their efforts, and channeled a guide from Jupiter called J. W. In 1962 Lee died after a prolonged fast while waiting in a Washington hotel room for government response to plans for a spaceship she had allegedly received from J. W., but she quickly acquired the status of a martyr in the religious UFO community, and messages from Lee herself were then channeled through the Heralds of the New Age.

Another early UFO group with its own martyr was Christ Brotherhood, Inc., established in 1956 by Wallace C. Halsey, who channeled UFO messages in his sleep of coming world destruction and the gathering of a saved remnant. He disappeared mysteriously in 1963 on a light plane flight from Utah to Nevada. Also Theosophical/apocalyptic was the UFO group now called the Association of Sananda and Sanat Kumara. It was the subject of a famous sociological study, *When Prophecy Fails*,⁷ that in turn was probably the inspiration of a delightful novel by Alison Lurie, *Invis-*

ible Friends. The sociological report describes channeled predictions of a global cataclysm from which only a few faithful would be saved by UFOs; when the event failed to happen, it was said to have been alleviated by the faith of the few but fervent believers.

Other mediumistic UFO groups from this period include Mark-Age, founded in 1956 by Charles Boyd Gentzel to channel messages from the spiritual government of the solar system, and Unarius, established in 1954 by Ernest L. Norman. Unarius has continued since his death under his widow, Ruth Norman, who communicates with an Intergalactic Confederation of advanced planets.

Probably the best known group is the Aetherius Society, established in London by George King, who was told in 1955 by the Master Aetherius of Venus to become the "primary terrestrial mental channel" of the Interplanetary Parliament. The Aetherius Society has been heavily engaged in apocalyptic struggles against "black magicians" seeking to enslave earth. Under direction from above, its devotees channel spiritual forces from friendly space ships orbiting our planet toward places of particular need. These activities are typically given military-sounding titles: Operation Bluewater, Operation Karmalight. Like the others just mentioned, Aetherius is very Theosophical in its doctrinal background, and Spiritualistic in its mediumistic modes of operation.

By the 1970s UFO groups emerged that fit the common stereotype of a cult. One of the best examples was HIM (Human Individual Metamorphosis), which appeared in California in 1975. HIM was led by a middle-aged man and woman called Bo and Peep, also known as "The Two," who persuaded followers to give up their possessions and follow them into wilderness camps, where they were to be met by UFOs and carried physically to "the level above human."⁸

A somewhat different note was presented by a UFO group in the 1980s and early 1990s in Ottawa and Russell, Kansas, based on a conservative Christian rather than Theosophical belief system. The

tone of the group is suggested by the title of the newsletter, "The Four: A Christian Newsletter of the Tribulation." In essence, the doctrine is that the UFO beings are spiritual guides, including angels and "Cephas" (St. Peter), who will help human beings through prophecy and assistance during the time of the tribulation and the coming the Antichrist. The movement received considerable publicity when one leader, Dr. Scott Corder, had his medical license revoked and another, Marcia Brock, a high school teacher, was dismissed after disappearing for three weeks. It eventuated that she, Corder, Donna Butts, the primary channel of the group, and others had gone on a mysterious mission to Israel.⁹

There was a spiritually negative side of UFOs that also commenced as early as the 1950s. In 1956 the late Gray Barker (1925–1984), then a young UFO enthusiast in West Virginia, published his first book, *They Knew Too Much About Flying Saucers*, a trailblazer in the exploration of demonic counterpoints to saucerian "technological angels."¹⁰ The book centers on the story of Albert K. Bender, of Bridgeport, Connecticut, who until 1953 was director of a UFO club called the International Flying Saucer Bureau. After allegedly discovering the secret of the saucers, Bender received an unpleasant call from three men dressed in black suits who minced no words. Shortly after, Bender terminated the bureau and its publication.

Barker related other appearances of the Men in Black. This fearsome threesome, dressed soberly as undertakers and possessed of an uncanny knowledge of who had seen what, with their odd clockwork gait and mechanical-sounding voices, were now revealed to have phoned or called on a fair number of UFO percipients. In each case they made it very clear that life would not go well for those who knew too much, or worse said or wrote too much, about UFO matters above their competence. These "heavies" of the saucer scene fast became a part of UFO folklore everywhere.¹¹ Among Barker's alleged "silencing" episodes was one in New Zealand involving John Stuart. Eventually, however, Barker published for Stuart the horrendous account of the rape

of a female associate of his by a cosmic being.¹²

The episodes recounted by Barker and Stuart were among the first signs of a remarkable shift of emphasis spiritual UFOism was to make around the 1970s, from benign to ominous, culminating in the late 1980s spate of works on UFO abductions, "missing time," strange medical examinations, and half-human pregnancies. While not explicitly religious in quite the sense of the fifties-type contactees, these accounts strongly recall parallel narratives in folklore, mythology, and the psychology of religion.

Perhaps the earliest well-known account of this type was the alleged abduction of a twenty-three-year-old Brazilian farmer, Antonio Villas-Boas, in 1957; he reported both medical treatment and sexual intercourse with a beautiful unearthly woman as a captive aboard a UFO. But the case which set the trend was certainly that of Barney and Betty Hill, a New Hampshire couple, in 1961, recorded in a bestselling book by John G. Fuller.¹³ This pair was reported abducted in the middle of the night while driving through lonely country, and subjected to a medical examination. Then their memories were erased, only to be later recovered through hypnosis.

Further accounts of "missing time" have been collected by Budd Hopkins and David Jacobs. These experiences have also tended to involve distasteful medical procedures with an emphasis on the reproductive functions and sometimes the disturbing sight of sickly looking human-alien children allegedly partly their own. The reported appearance of the aliens—slight, hairless, pallid, large-eyed—has been fairly consistent.¹⁴

These accounts were in the same world of experience as those recounted by Whitley Strieber in his bestselling books *Communion* and *Transformation*, in which the prominent novelist retailed allegedly true stories of furtive sightings and meetings in his Catskills vacation home with aliens of similar description, and subsequent recollections of "missing time" experiences involving them from his childhood and youth.¹⁵ But, as the quasi-religious titles

suggest, Strieber believed that the aliens he encountered were, despite terrifying aspects of his experience, ultimately benign.

Hopkins and Jacobs are not so sure about the extraterrestrials' intentions; at best, it seems to them, humans may be no more than laboratory animals to our uninvited guests. The same level of anxiety is surely reflected in a growing interest of the 1980s and 1990s in conspiracy theories involving UFOs, government cover-ups, and even secret and sinister relationships between government agencies, aliens, and abductions.¹⁶

At the same time, other writers, such as Michael Grosso and Kenneth Ring, offered new positive spiritual assessments of UFOs by comparing them to such widely discussed phenomena as apparitions of the Virgin Mary and near-death experiences, all said to herald important transformations of consciousness both individual and worldwide. Ring contends that the UFO abductors may come not from without but from within, but are thereby all the more spiritual in their significance. The presumed aliens come as mirrors to ourselves in an alienated world. Their ashen, emaciated visages reflect ourselves and our children in the soulless, polluted, sterile world we are creating; their brusque, impersonal reproductive experiments throw back to us our own purely instrumental treatment of sex, animals, and other humans; their examinations point toward our own need for self-examination.¹⁷

UFOs and UFO religions have also produced skeptics. While most seem content to subject it to the light, satirical treatment

they believe it richly deserves, a few have gone on to contend UFO belief contains real social dangers. Chief among them have been persons related to the American Humanist Association and the related Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), its periodical *Skeptical Inquirer*, and the *Skeptics UFO Newsletter*, edited by the most active UFO debunker who is also the CSICOP UFO specialist, Philip J. Klass. While most of the debunking is along the lines of mundane investigations of reported UFO sightings and encounters, Klass and his CSICOP colleagues also have from time to time expressed disquiet at UFOism as religion masquerading as science. They tend to perceive it as dangerous because of its promotion of credulity and of authoritarian, even proto-fascist, truth in charismatic contactee figures; they see the most recent emphasis on abduction scenarios as a no less dangerous valorization of essentially pathological psychological states, which should instead be treated within the framework of a rational worldview.¹⁸

In summary, the remarkable twentieth-century UFO experience can be seen as reflecting the hopes, dreams, and anxieties of a turbulent era. While not often explicitly religious, UFO experience has certainly employed categories from the worlds of myth and religion to make clear its persuasion that we are not alone, that there are modern entities capable of moving among us of supernatural, or virtually supernatural, power to harm and heal, like unto the demons, angels, and saviors of old.

Notes

1. On "foo fighters" and the 1896 "airship" see Jerome Clark, *The Emergence of a Phenomenon: UFOs from the Beginning through 1959* (Detroit: Apogee Books, 1990), 17-39 and 153-56; David M. Jacobs, *UFO Controversy in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 5-34 and 35-36; and, on the "airship," Daniel Cohen, *The Great Airship Mystery: A UFO of the 1890s* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1981).

2. C. G. Jung, *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Sky* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1959).

3. J. Gordon Melton, *Encyclopedia of American Religions*, vol. 2 (Wilmington, N.C.: McGrath Publishing, 1978), 114-15.

4. Jacques Vallee, *Passage to Magonia: From Folklore to Flying Saucers* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1969). See also Keith Thompson, *Angels and Aliens: UFOs and the Mythic Imagination* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1991).

5. Thomas E. Bullard, "Folkloric Dimensions of the UFO Phenomenon," *Journal of UFO Studies*, New Series, vol. 3 (1991): 1-58.

6. "Mr. Adamski Alights in N.Z.—From Conventional Plane," *Evening Post* (Wellington), January 21, 1959, p. 1. Cited in Robert S. Ellwood, *Islands of the Dawn: The Story of Alternative Spirituality in New Zealand* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993), 86.

7. Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956). This book provoked much controversy concerning the ethics of the covert participant-observer role of two of the investigators.

8. Robert W. Balch and David Taylor, "Becoming a Sect: A Story of Social Change in a UFO Cult" (Missoula, Mont.: The authors, 1978). See also Hayden Hewes and Brad Steiger, *UFO Missionaries Extraordinary* (New York: Pocket Books, 1976), with an extensive interview with "The Two."

9. Based on information from papers and newspaper clippings kindly provided by Professor Timothy Miller of the University of Kansas. Undoubtedly the best earlier writer who endeavored to relate UFOs positively to the Bible was Barry Downing, in *The Bible and Flying Saucers* (New York: Lippincott, 1968). On the other hand, some fundamentalist literature has taken a demonic view of the entities.

10. Gray Barker, *They Knew Too Much About Flying Saucers* (New York: University Books, 1956; London: T. Werner Laurie, 1958). It must be noted that Barker was not a particularly careful researcher, quite capable of sensationalizing and "leg-pulling."

11. See also Gray Barker, *M.I.B.: The Secret Terror Among Us* (Jane Lew, W.V.: New Age Press, 1983).

12. John Stuart, *UFO Warning* (Clarksburg, W.V.: Saucerian Books, 1963).

13. John G. Fuller, *The Interrupted Journey* (New York: Dial Press, 1966).

14. Budd Hopkins, *Missing Time* (New York: Richard Marek, 1981); *Intruders* (New York: Random House, 1987). David M. Jacobs, *Secret Life: Firsthand Accounts of UFO Abductions* (New York: Simon Schuster, 1992). See also Raymond E. Fowler, *The Watchers: The Secret Design Behind UFO Abductions* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990); and Thomas E. Bullard, *UFO Abductions: The Measure of a Mystery* (Mount Ranier, Md.: Fund for UFO Research, 1987).

15. Whitley Strieber, *Communion* (New York: William Morrow, 1987); *Transformation* (New York: William Morrow, 1988). See also Ed Conroy, *Report on Communion: An Independent Investigation of and Commentary on Whitley Strieber's "Communion"* (New York: William Morrow, 1989).

16. See, for example, Linda Moulton Howe, *An Alien Harvest* (Little, Colo.: Linda Moulton Howe Productions, 1989); Timothy Good, *Above Top Secret: The Worldwide UFO Cover-up* (New York: William Morrow, 1988), and Lawrence Fawcett and Barry J. Greenwood, *The UFO Coverup* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1984).

17. See Michael Grosso, *Frontiers of the Soul* (Wheaton, Ill.: Quest Books, 1992); Kenneth Ring, *The Omega Project: Near Death Experiences, UFO Encounters, and Mind at Large* (New York: William Morrow, 1992).

18. See Philip J. Klass, *UFO Abductions: A Dangerous Game* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1989); *UFOs Explained* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974); *UFOs: The Public Deceived* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1983).

Suggestions for Further Reading

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Rasmussen, Richard Michael. *The UFO Literature: A Comprehensive Annotated Bibliography of Works in English.* Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1985.

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UFO religion refers to any religion in which the existence of extraterrestrial (ET) entities operating unidentified flying objects (UFOs) is an element of belief. Typically, adherents of such religions believe the ETs to be interested in the welfare of humanity which either already is, or eventually will become, part of a pre-existing ET civilization. Others may incorporate ETs into a more supernatural worldview in which the UFO occupants are more akin to angels than physical aliens; this distinction New religious movements such as the Nation of Islam, Scientology, and Jediism incorporate the UFO narrative into older religious traditions and scriptures. Popular television programs like Ancient Aliens provide viewers with interpretive strategies that encourage them to view religious visions of the past through the lens of the modern UFO narrative, turning medieval angels into aliens, for example. A UFO religion is any religion in which the existence of extraterrestrial (ET) entities operating unidentified flying objects (UFOs) is an element of belief. Typically, adherents of such religions believe the ETs to be interested in the welfare of humanity which either already is, or eventually will become, part of a pre-existing ET civilization. Others may incorporate ETs into a more supernatural worldview in which the UFO occupants are more akin to angels than physical aliens; this distinction may