



Extraterrestrial/UFO Religion

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Introduction

Unidentified flying objects (UFOs)—aka flying saucers—and extraterrestrials (ETs) figure prominently in the soteriologies of many new age religions. Since its origin in the 1950s, UFO religion, what historian of religions Robert Ellwood (1995) calls 'ufoism' or, as I prefer, 'ET religion(s)', while predicated upon traditional myths of superhuman/supernatural beings, has been nourished by the tensions of the current age, especially (but not only) the Cold War and the threat posed by nuclear weapons (Flaherty 1990). Here 'religion' is understood as belief in superhuman beings, 'any beings believed to possess power greater than man, who can work good and/or evil on man' (Spiro 1966, 91). In the current article, though, 'ET religion' refers not to belief in maleficent superhuman ETs but to new age religions in which ETs figure as saviours and as agents of millenarian transformation.

The eschatology of such ET religions, in which Cold War fear of nuclear war is a frequent motif, while predicated upon traditional mythological themes of world destruction and salvation by otherworldly beings, reflects the dominant concerns of the current age, especially the threat of nuclear destruction. Since the detonation of the first atomic bomb in 1945, humanity has lived with the threat of global destruction, in light of which there arose a myth of ET saviours prepared to prevent nuclear destruction, evacuate a chosen people prior to the nuclear conflagration, or assist a surviving remnant of humanity. Thus, a definition of nuclear war as inevitable and unmanageable in its effects is transformed into a definition of nuclear war as either avoidable with the assistance of ET saviours or inevitable but manageable with their assistance.

UFOs and the Bible

References to the Apocalypse and the second coming of Christ abound in the primary UFO literature. The UFO is often regarded as the vehicle of ascension in which Jesus 'was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight' (Acts 1:9, King James Version), the 'clouds' in which the believers will be caught up 'to meet the Lord in the air' (1 Thessalonians 4:17 KJV), and the vehicle of Christ's second coming when all the peoples of Earth 'shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory' (Matthew 24:30 KJV). As theologian, Presbyterian minister, and 'ancient astronaut' theorist Barry Downing

wrote:

Previously the Power of Christ was hidden, but in the future his lordship will be made manifest over the whole earth, he will return in some sort of UFO with great power and glory (brightness), 'and he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call'. (Downing 1968, 167-70)

The "ET Hypothesis"

In June 1947 Kenneth Arnold, a private pilot from the US state of Idaho, saw nine flying objects as he flew over the Cascade Range in Washington state. Arnold said later that they moved like saucers skipping on water, and the press coined the term 'flying saucer', which was reified in the popular imagination as flying discs of ET origin even though what Arnold saw were not disc shaped; they were crescent shaped. Nor did Arnold believe that the objects he had seen were ET spaceships; rather, he believed they had been unconventional aircraft being developed by the US military. In 1953 the US Air Force introduced the term 'unidentified flying object' or 'UFO'. However, 'UFO', like 'flying saucer', soon became synonymous in popular usage with 'ET spaceship'. Donald E. Keyhoe (1897-1988), one of the earliest proponents of the ET hypothesis and previously a US Marine, held that Earth has been surveilled by ETs for centuries but that 'this observation suddenly increased in 1947, following the series of A-bomb explosions begun in 1945' (Keyhoe 1950, 174).

George Adamski

In 1953 George Adamski (1891-1965) and his friend Desmond Leslie (1921-2001) published *Flying Saucers Have Landed*, in which they described how Adamski and his friend George Hunt Williamson (1926-86) saw a flying saucer in California's Mojave Desert on 20 November 1952, whose occupant, a Venusian named Orthon, telepathically communicated to Adamski the concern of the Space People over nuclear weapons:

He made me understand that their coming was friendly. Also, as he gestured, that they were concerned with radiations going out from earth ... I asked if this concern was due to the explosions of our bombs with their resultant vast radioactive clouds? My next question was whether this was dangerous, and I pictured in my mind; a scene of destruction. To this, too, he nodded his head in the affirmative, but upon his face there was no sign of resentment or judgment. His expression was one of understanding, and great compassion. (Adamski and Leslie [1953] 1977, 213-14).

Theosophy and ET Religions

For many years before his alleged meeting with Orthon, Adamski had been deeply immersed in the teachings of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-91), cofounder in 1875 of the Theosophical Society. The

Theosophical pantheon is dominated by a series of Masters, Elder Brothers of humanity who purportedly live not on other planets but on Earth. The Masters, according to Annie Besant (1847–1933), President of the Theosophical Society from 1907 to 1933, are incarnate human beings who have retained human form long after they might have passed on to higher planes (Besant 1912, 60–63).

While as sociologist David Stuppel notes, the idea of ETs was epiphenomenal to Theosophy (Stuppel 1984), Theosophist Charles Leadbeater (1854–1934) described a solar system of inhabited planets. Of greatest importance are the inhabitants of Venus, who have guided humanity's evolution for millennia:

Our terrestrial evolution received a most valuable stimulus from the assistance given to us by our sister globe, Venus. ... These august Beings have been called the Lords of the Flame and the Children of the Fire-mist, and They have produced a wonderful effect upon our evolution.
(Leadbeater 1912, 131)

Blavatsky's major work, *The Secret Doctrine* (1888–93), purports to be a commentary on a reputedly ancient text, the *Book of Dzyan*, that, according to Blavatsky, was originally written in Senzar, the language that Blavatsky claimed was brought to Earth by Sanat Kumara from the planet Venus (Blavatsky 1888–93, 2:31). In the Hindu Puranas, Sanat Kumara is one of the four kumaras—Sanat Kumara, Sananda, Sanaka, and Sanatana—the mind-born sons of the god Brahma, who in the Theosophical synthesis became the Venusian Lords of the Flame. Leadbeater dated their arrival on Earth to 18,500,000 Before Present (Leadbeater 1925).

The Contactees

Soon after Adamski's alleged 1952 encounter with Orthon, other 'contactees' were claiming encounters with ETs. Daniel Fry (1908–92) claimed to have met an ET named A-lan (Fry 1954) in New Mexico's White Sands Proving Grounds near the Trinity site, where the first atomic bomb was tested in 1945. Truman Bethurum (1898–1969) claimed to have encountered Aura Rhanes from the planet Clarion (Bethurum 1954). Orfeo Angelucci (1912–93) of Burbank, California, was allegedly informed by an ET whom he called Neptune that:

There is still a slight chance to avert the War of Desolation for in the Time dimension nothing is absolute. But if the horror of the War of the End of an Age shall come, our multitudes are at hand to aid all of those not spiritually arrayed against us. (Angelucci 1955, 124)

As historian David Michael Jacobs noted, the contactees were 'operating within a common fear of the 1950's—the inevitability of nuclear war' (Jacobs 1975, 115).

Billy Meier

Eduard (Billy) Meier (b. 1937) of Bülach, Switzerland, claims that in 1975 he had the first of a series of contacts with ETs whom he calls the Plejaran from the planet Erra in the constellation Pleiades. Meier alleges regular contact with “Semjase” and “Asket,” idealized humanoid ETs from the Pleiades, and contends that Adam was created not by Yahweh but by Semjase (see Flaherty 2010). According to Meier, the Plejaran are human; they are not gods. Meier collected Semjase’s teachings in *The Contact Notes* (1988–95). Plejaran civilization, according to Meier, originated not in the Pleiades but on a planet in the constellation Lyra. War ensued on the home planet, and before its destruction some of the Lyrans succeeded in escaping to planets in the Pleiades and the Hyades (Kinder 1987, 98).

The Doomed Planet

The doomed planet has been a motif of the UFO myth since its inception in the early 1950s. Often the doomed planet is located not in a remote galaxy but in our own solar system, where its debris formed the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter. The doomed planet has been called Clarion, Lucifer, Lyra, Maldek, and Car. The group that social psychologist Leon Festinger described in *When Prophecy Fails* held that the planet Car was destroyed in a conflict between ‘the scientists’, led by Lucifer, and ‘the people who followed the Light’, led by Christ (Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter 1964, 53). In 1953 George Hunt Williamson allegedly received a series of channelled messages from a representative of the Interplanetary Confederation. He was told:

You have lately achieved the means of destroying yourselves. Do not be hasty in your self-congratulation for yours is not the first civilization to have achieved and used such means. The ‘lost world’ known to you as the Asteroid Belt is spoken of in your records as ‘Lucifer, the Shining One’. We call this planet ‘Maldek, the Tongue’. (Williamson 1953, 26)

Ashtar, Sananda, and Channeled ET Communications

Adamski claimed that during his 1952 encounter in the Mojave Desert, Orthon had communicated telepathically with him. Soon, other contactees were claiming telepathic communication with the Space People. George van Tassel (1910–78) of Giant Rock, California, was the first to claim telepathic contact with Ashtar. Sociologist Christopher Helland (2000, 2003a, 2003b) has written about Ashtar’s worship. On 18 July 1952, Van Tassel allegedly received the following communication:

Hail to you beings of Shan [Shan is said to be Earth to Ashtar’s followers]. ... Some years ago your time, your nuclear physicists penetrated the ‘Book of Knowledge’; they discovered how to explode the atom. ... To your government and to your people and through them to all governments and all people on the planet of Shan, accept the warning as a blessing that mankind may survive. My light, we shall remain in touch here at this cone of receptivity. My love, I am Ashtar. (Van Tassel 1952,

Soon after Van Tassel began channelling Ashtar, his associate Robert Short (1929–2019) also claimed he was channelling Ashtar. Van Tassel did not accept Short's experiences as genuine, though, and Short broke from Van Tassel in 1952 to found the Ashtar Command. Others soon claimed to be in telepathic communication with Ashtar. According to Ethel P. Hill (1875–1962), one of Ashtar's earliest followers, who allegedly received Ashtar's communications via automatic writing, Ashtar reports directly to Jesus and is the commander of ten million Space Men (Hill 1957).

Ashtar's followers emphasize that he is not a fallen angel; rather, he is one of the Herald Angels preparing Earth (Shan) for Christ's return, and Ashtar is second in importance only to Sananda (Jesus):

In the Alliance of the Space Confederation, Commander Ashtar is the highest in authority for our hemisphere. He is also the Commander of the Star Ship upon which our Beloved Lord and Great Commander, Jesus-Sananda, spends so much of His time. (Tuella 1985, 4)

Dorothy Martin (1900–92), known as Sister Thedra (described as 'Mrs Keech' by Festinger in *When Prophecy Fails*), was channelling Sananda (Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter 1964).

ET Religious Movements

A number of contactees have been quite successful in organizing religious movements based on their alleged revelations. Here, chosen as representative, are the Aetherius Society, founded by George King; the Unarius Foundation, founded by Ernest and Ruth Norman; Heaven's Gate, founded by Marshall Herff Appplewhite; and the Raëlian Movement, founded by Claude Vorilhon, aka Rael (Light of the Elohim).

The Aetherius Society

The Aetherius Society was founded in Britain in 1954 by Dr George King (1919–97), who claimed telepathic contact with Aetherius. As sociologist Roy Wallis (1975, 30) observed, King had for some time been immersed in Theosophical teachings. More recently, Scott Scribner and Gregory Wheeler (2003), Simon Smith (2003) has written about the Aetherius Society. Cosmic Masters inhabiting other planets in the solar system have been guiding humanity's evolution for millennia. Like Jesus (Sanat Kumara to King), Aetherius is a Cosmic Master from Venus. Whereas Aetherius, Jesus, and Buddha are from Venus, Krishna, according to the Aetherius Society, is from Saturn, where the Interplanetary Parliament is based. 'Jesus came in mystery, but this next Master will come openly in a 'Flying Saucer' and the whole world will know of His coming' (Aetherius Society 1981). King was allegedly chosen by the Space Masters to charge Holy Mountains throughout the world with Cosmic Energy, an undertaking referred to as 'Operation Starlight'. Nine mountains were 'charged' in the UK before King left Britain for Los Angeles. The spiritual energy stored in mountains, according to King, can be released through prayer to avert war and prevent natural disasters.

The Unarius Foundation

In 1954 electrical engineer Ernest Norman (1904–71) and his wife, Ruth Norman (1900–93), founded the Unarius Foundation (Universal Articulate Interdimensional Understanding of Science). Social psychologist Diana Tumminia (2003, 2005) and Tumminia and R. G. Kirkpatrick (1995) have written about the group. The Unarius Foundation teaches that thirty-three spacecraft representing thirty-three planets will descend to Earth, fusing electronically to construct a two-and-a-half-mile-high tower housing ET technicians, who will advise humanity in Unarius. The Space Brothers will construct a second tower to draw energy from the Earth and the cosmos, thereby supplying all the energy needs of Earth. According to the Unarians, a previous attempt to construct such a tower was made by inventor Nikola Tesla (1856–1943), whom the Unarians describe as:

He who could cause electricity to travel across the country or underground with no wires, invent electronic equipment to revolutionize the world; that he could (and does now, freed of the limiting physical) generate such Power that it will change not only this world, but the many worlds. (Unarius Foundation 1974, 5)

(In fact, Tesla constructed a 187-foot-high tower in 1901 that he intended to be part of a world wireless system.)

Heaven's Gate

Probably no ET religion has attracted more attention than Heaven's Gate. Sociologist Robert Balch (1982, 1985, 1995) and professor of religion Benjamin Zeller (2006, 2010, 2014) have written extensively about the group, originally known as Human Individual Metamorphosis. In 1975 Marshall Herff Applewhite (1931–97) and Bonnie Lu Trusdale Nettles (1927–85) (aka Him and Her, Bo and Peep, Do and Ti, or simply The Two) gave a lecture about UFOs in the US state of Oregon. More than thirty people disappeared with Applewhite and Nettles, who styled themselves the two End-Time witnesses of Revelation 11. Not much was heard from the group until 1993, when they resurfaced as Total Overcomers Anonymous, but they soon changed their name to Heaven's Gate. Nettles had died in 1985. The members of Heaven's Gate believed themselves to be incarnate, genderless ETs from The Evolutionary Level Above Human (TELAH).

Like many UFO enthusiasts in 1997, Applewhite and his followers believed that a huge ET spaceship was approaching Earth. In 1996 an amateur astronomer had reported seeing a small, 'Saturn-like object' travelling with the comet Hale-Bopp. Hale-Bopp was the marker Applewhite and his followers had been waiting for. The smaller object was the spaceship that would take them home. Having completed their mission on Earth, it was time to return to TELAH. In 1997 the thirty-nine members of Heaven's Gate committed mass suicide. 'Planet Earth about to be recycled', Applewhite wrote in his final message. 'Your only chance to survive or evacuate is to leave with us' (Applewhite 1997).

The Raelian Movement

Perhaps the most successful ET religion, though, is the Raelian Movement. Sociologist of religions Susan

Palmer (2004) has written about the group. On 13 December 1973, Claude Vorilhon, aka Rael (b. 1946), allegedly saw a UFO land in the caldera of Puy de Lassolas, a volcano near Clermont-Ferrand, France. Vorilhon claims to have met a diminutive humanoid ET whom, Vorilhon alleges, was one of the Elohim, the ET scientists who created humanity. The Elohim are not gods, Vorilhon was told, although they are our creators. Vorilhon was renamed Rael ('light of the Elohim'), chosen by the Elohim as the Prophet of the Age of Apocalypse.

The Elohim allegedly instructed Rael to create a movement to spread the messages of the Elohim creators worldwide, and to build an 'embassy' near Jerusalem where the Elohim spaceships will land (Rael 2005, 176). Raelianism's embassy will be, according to Rael, the rebuilt Third Temple (Rael 2005, 368) that to many Zionists and Christians is a necessary prerequisite of the Messianic Age.

Rael claims that in 1975 he encountered the Elohim a second time. They took him to the Elohim home planet and to a second smaller planet nearby, the Planet of the Eternals, where he met Moses, Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, and Yahweh. On the Planet of the Eternals, people live for seven hundred years. Upon death, individuals are cloned from cells taken from their old bodies. Very soon, according to Rael, humanity will be able to create life as the Elohim created us.

According to Rael, the development of nuclear weapons was a sign to the Elohim that human beings were ready for reestablished contact with their ET creators. Whereas to Rael the sixth seal of the Apocalypse (Revelation 6:12-17) represents the development of nuclear weapons, the seventh seal (Revelation 8:1-6) represents nuclear war (Rael 2005, 299). Rael's Elohim will not intervene to prevent nuclear war. In the event of nuclear war, though, those who have had their 'cellular plan' transmitted to Rael or to a Guide designated by Rael will be re-created on the Planet of the Eternals.

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