

INTRODUCTION

On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mountain. All of the people in camp heard a sound like a loud trumpet blast, and trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord was descending upon it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked. As the sound grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. And the Lord landed upon Mount Sinai.

—Exodus 19:16-20

While the tale of Moses' encounter with Yahweh is familiar to everyone raised in the Judeo-Christian religious tradition, few would connect that story with contemporary interest in UFOs. Yet it is not difficult to see how one might interpret the above passage as describing the landing of some great spaceship on Mt. Sinai. Utilizing suggestive narratives about sky gods from the Bible and from many other religious and cultural traditions, a popular writer by the name of Erich von Däniken theorized that the "chariots of the gods" described in ancient mythology were really the space vessels of an extraterrestrial race concerned with the fate of humanity. While von Däniken's speculations have been severely criticized, it is nevertheless clear that his ideas struck a resonant cord in the public imagination. The significance of the connections he perceived may, however, lie in precisely the opposite direction from what he theorized. Let us, therefore, invert von Däniken's hermeneutic and consider how a religious tradition emphasizing sky gods might influence one to invest religious significance in the contemporary phenomenon of unidentified flying objects.

Historically, the human race has derived spiritual meaning from every dimension of the environment. For reasons that are too complex to develop in this short space, the Western religious tradition desacralized the Earth, and came to imagine God as residing in the sky. The celestial abode of the Deity is clear from certain events in Jesus' ministry as recorded in the Gospels. The many relevant incidents include:

1. His reference to God as "Our Father who art in Heaven."
2. The Holy Spirit's descent from the sky following Jesus' baptism.
3. His return to the heavens after leaving his disciples in the book of Acts.

These are only a few examples of a marked tendency in the Old and New Testaments to portray divinity as being somehow "located" in the sky. To recast this observation in more contemporary terms, we might say that the deity of Western religions is—in some sense—an "extraterrestrial" being. There are, however, many other characteristics of UFOs that link them to the religious consciousness.

One of the classics of religious phenomenology is Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*. In this work, Otto carefully distinguishes fundamental religious experience—humanity's naked confrontation with the Sacred—from the other components of religion, and then proceeds to analyze this primordial experience into component parts. According to Otto, one encounters the Sacred as a powerful, alien reality that does not belong to the world of ordinary human existence. This experience encompasses components of both fear and attraction: The Sacred simultaneously repels and fascinates; it is "uncanny" and "awesome." The Sacred is also mysterious—something we cannot grasp with our rational minds, yet which we endlessly attempt to understand.

The parallels between religious experience and UFO experiences are clear enough. UFOs are uncanny and mysterious. If the reader has seen the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, she or he will recall the climactic final scene in which the mother ship appears: This enormous piece of alien machinery is experienced by the gathered officials and technicians as both beautiful and frightful—an incomprehensibly awesome power before which they feel like helpless children. This is precisely the kind of encounter that Otto characterizes as religious.

That flying saucers and their inhabitants have come to be invested with religious meaning should not, therefore, be surprising. This religious meaning can be manifested overtly in such explicitly religious organizations as the Unarians and the Raelians (described elsewhere in the present volume). It can also be manifested less obviously, in the

form of certain themes and patterns that—when cloaked in the guise of flying machines—are not immediately recognized as religious, but which fulfill religious functions.

The great psychoanalyst Carl Jung, for example, pointed out that the theme of humanity's rescue by extraterrestrial beings is a religious myth recast in technological guise: Modern people who are no longer able to believe that humankind will be saved by God *can* believe that we will be saved by powerful, godlike beings from other worlds. In an expression that succinctly captures this general interpretative approach to UFOs, Jung referred to flying saucers as "technological angels."

The present anthology is a comprehensive account of the religious dimension of the UFO/flying saucer experience. Chapters range from analyses of the religious meanings attached to this phenomenon by the larger society to surveys of specific movements that claim inspiration from "Space Brothers" and other extraterrestrial sources. Although the wealth of existing sociological, psychological, and anthropological articles suggests that this is an important phenomenon, few book-length studies exist. *The Gods Have Landed* fills this gap, providing readers with a richly textured, interdisciplinary approach to UFO religions.

Ufologists—as those with a serious interest in this phenomenon refer to themselves—usually date the emergence of UFOs into the public consciousness from Kenneth Arnold's sighting on June 24, 1947, and the emergence of interpretations of the phenomenon to George Adamski's reported encounter with flying saucers on November 20, 1952. In the first chapter, "The Contactees: A Survey," J. Gordon Melton discusses religious movements and thinkers that relied upon extraterrestrial wisdom long before 1947. He also calls attention to the continuities between these earlier contactees and current UFO religions.

John A. Saliba's "Religious Dimensions of UFO Phenomena" is a comprehensive introduction to the various ways in which UFOs can be regarded as religious. The different types of interests people have in UFOs are first distinguished, showing how they are related to the kind of UFO organizations and associations and to the type of alien creatures believed in. Second, three categories of UFO groups, movements, or cults are outlined and a few examples of each given. Third, the various forms of Christian interpretations of UFO phenomena are briefly described. Fourth, the major religious themes which have already become part of the UFO subculture are analyzed. Finally, an attempt is made to assess the importance and significance of UFO religions.

The phenomenon of supposed abductions by inhabitants of flying saucers did not attract much attention until the early 1970s. Accounts of abductee experiences have, however, come to dominate the UFO field,

so that books published on abductions now outnumber books on all other UFO subjects combined by a substantial margin. John Whitmore's "Religious Dimensions of the UFO Abductee Experience" presents a detailed analysis of this phenomenon, and demonstrates the various ways in which abduction experiences reflect more traditional religious patterns.

George Kirkpatrick and Diana Tumminia's "Unarius: Emergent Aspects of an American Flying Saucer Group" provides an overview of one of the more interesting UFO organizations. Famous for its prophecy, the Unarius Academy of Science awaits the landing of starships in the year 2001. In the interim, Uriel (Ruth Norman), Archangel and Cosmic Visionary, channels messages from the Space Brothers and leads Unarians through group past-life therapy sessions. This chapter presents an overview of the emergent processes involved in the growth of Unarius along with data on characteristics of the membership.

Susan Jean Palmer's "Women in the Raelian Movement" focuses on another highly interesting UFO group. The Raelians are one of the few new religious movements (NRMs) that tolerates sexual ambiguity and encourages homosexual expression. While the Raelians are characterized by traits that usually promote sexual equality and female leadership in NRMs, there are surprisingly few women in leadership positions in the Raelian hierarchy. Palmer's chapter gives an overview of this movement while exploring the factors that tend to keep women out of the hierarchy.

Robert W. Balch is well-known among sociologists of religion for the papers he has published over the years on the "Bo and Peep" UFO group. In "Waiting for the Ships" he retells the story of the mysterious couple known as "the Two," and the history of their group from its origins in Texas through 1980 when Balch stopped collecting systematic data. He also discusses why voluntary affiliation was not sufficient to create a committed, deployable membership. Genuine commitment did not develop until Bo and Peep introduced social influence processes such as regimentation and certain mental exercises.

Spiritualism and flying saucer groups, like many other nontraditional religious movements, have been highly successful in such areas of the world as New Zealand. The transmission of UFOism to New Zealand in the present century exhibits certain remarkable parallels to the transmission of spiritualism in the preceding century. Robert S. Ellwood's "Spiritualism and UFO Religion in New Zealand" analyzes this parallel in some detail. In both cases, visiting speakers from the U.S. or the U.K. generated considerable media publicity, and left behind much controversy as well as small groups of enthusiastic believers.

Certain skeptical scientists and tabloid journalists have naively asserted that, if the existence of extraterrestrial intelligence was to be decisively proven, traditional Christianity would collapse. Ted Peters's "Exo-Theology: Speculations on Extraterrestrial Life" demonstrates why this view is mistaken. The first part of his chapter surveys historical and contemporary Jewish and Christian thinkers who have integrated such a possibility into their theology. The second part of the chapter examines the fundamentalist literature of the 1970s that tended to demonize UFOs, and which may have given outsiders the false impression that the Christian tradition was unduly Earth centered.

The present volume concludes with two comprehensive bibliographic surveys. John A. Saliba's "UFO Contactee Phenomena from a Sociopsychological Perspective," the first of these review chapters, provides a systematic overview of social-scientific articles on UFOs. This chapter is especially useful for its summaries of most existing interpretations of this phenomenon. The concluding chapter, J. Gordon Melton and George M. Eberhart's "The Flying Saucer Contactee Movement, 1950-1994: A Bibliography" provides a comprehensive listing of both primary and secondary sources.