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CONTACTEES, CULTS, AND CULTURE

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Religious cults traditionally have been a source of amusement to outsiders; but since the Jonestown mass suicide, amusement has changed to fear. Correctly sensing that cult organizations are inherently unstable, cult members are assumed to be irrational. In so many words, the man-in-the-street, and the research scientist alike, openly wonder: "What is wrong with these people that they think strange thoughts and act in a bizarre manner?" In this paper we argue that this pathological model of cult membership is both gratuitous and inaccurate.

The reader is asked to consult his/her own experience--perhaps a parent-teacher organization to which he/she belongs. Don't people join such organizations for a variety of reasons? One person may join because he/she is concerned about his/her daughter's education. A second person may be seeking companionship. A third person, with political ambitions, may be trying to expand his/her circle of influential friends. But from the point of view of the ongoing activities of the parent-teacher organization, it is the behavior of the member, and not the motive that activates that behavior, that is crucial. Cynical and sincere behavior may be equally functional. Furthermore, since social systems require the completion of a variety of tasks, people with a variety of skills and behavioral orientations are required. For these two reasons it is faulty to assume that cult members are alike in psychological or sociological characteristics.

The success of a cult, at least a flying saucer cult, requires the existence of four factors: (1) a mystagogue, (2) an epistemic community, (3) a seedbed subculture from which members are recruited, and (4) personnel with requisite skills and motivation to perform the tasks required for the cult's ongoing life. We shall dis-

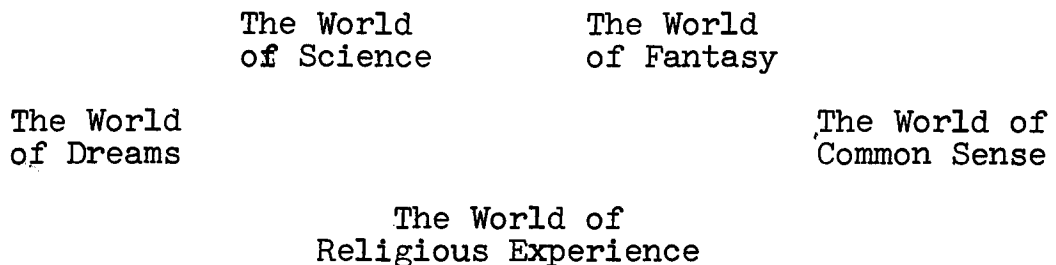


Figure 2. An Epistemic System with Religion as a Mental Home Base

Seedbed Subcultures

Studies of flying saucer cults repeatedly show that they are part of a larger occult social world.⁷ This social world is a source of (1) recruits, and (2) folklore themes that constitute the cults' official belief systems. Historically, the first wave of flying saucer contactees that appeared in the early 1950's consisted of occultists who associated flying saucers with other purported anomalies. These included process anomalies like telepathy, automatic writing, and astral projection and anomalous objects like geological wonders, monsters, and lost civilizations.⁸ Today, flying saucers are an enduring, though minor, occult theme. The typical occultist shares an excitement about a variety of wonders, seldom restricting his or her interest to only one topic.

Touring mystagogic speakers are assured an audience by groups whose business it is to sponsor such lectures, and local mystagogues compete for the everyday allegiance of followers. A pattern discovered by our research in Detroit revealed three types of followers. First is the hard core devotee who gives his/her total allegiance to one mystagogue. The hard core devotee, as in the case of the Aetherius Society, meets the mystagogue's considerable demands on his/her time, energy, and other resources. Next to this first stratum of members is a second stratum of occult dilettantes who divide their allegiance between two or more groups. Thus a person may be a sometime attender at Aetherius Society meetings, Self-Realization Fellowship meetings, and Summit Lighthouse meetings. A third type of follower, marginal to the occult social world, is the curiosity seeker who is interested but not knowledgeable about occultisms. Attracted, perhaps, by advertisements like the sign in the Detroit Aetherius Society's storefront window which reads, "Messages from Mars Here," curiosity seekers make both symbolic and financial contributions. For some groups these persons represent the outside world that, at least in theory, they hope to influence.

This three part division of the seedbed occult social world is



paralleled in the organization of the Institute for Cosmic Research, a topic to which we now turn.

THE INSTITUTE FOR COSMIC RESEARCH

The Institute for Cosmic Research was organized around "Gordon," a contactee who learned his trade by reading books written by contactees and by attending their lectures in Detroit during the 1950's. Born in 1914, the son of prominent Upper Peninsula Michigan parents and the husband of a former Detroit debutante, Gordon was trained in electrical engineering and had been working in Ann Arbor on what he referred to as "rocket research" when illness forced him into early retirement. He supported himself by building and selling houses on his family's resort area property, three hundred miles from Detroit.

Gordon's career as a contactee came of age in April, 1959 when he flew to Oklahoma City to participate in a most curious misadventure--the aborted flight of Otis T. Carr and the OTC-XI Circular Foil Space Craft. Otis Carr, the anti-hero of this episode, was one of several flying saucer personalities who had been appearing on the Long John Nebel radio talk show in New York City. One day in 1957 Carr announced that he had invented a fourth dimensional space craft. The machine, according to one report, was completely round and completely square.⁹ Operating in unison with the "free energy of space," the OTC-XI used an ultron electric accumulator. Carr had plans to produce family-sized versions of his invention for general consumption. But two years later when the day finally came for the first public demonstration of the OTC-XI, things did not go well. When Nebel and the media arrived in Oklahoma City they found the OTC-XI demolished in a local warehouse, and Carr in a local hospital.

Gordon had his own version of the Carr incident, complete with photographs which substantiated his claim that he, too, was on the scene. In Gordon's account he personally destroyed the OTC-XI on orders from "space brothers from Io" who objected to Carr's involvement with "financial speculators." Gordon also claimed that after the explosion he went to the hospital (where Carr recognized him as a "man from other worlds") and proceeded to heal the by-then thoroughly confused would-be space pilot.

Fresh from "victory" over Otis Carr, Gordon set out to build his own one-man free energy space ship, claiming the full cooperation of the space people who sent him to Oklahoma City. That ship was never built but he did produce photographs of two small, allegedly airborne model space ships and a "free energy light"--props that he later used to convince people of his abilities as an inventor.¹⁰

Birth of the Cult

Gordon's reputation was such by this time that he was accepting offers to lecture to flying saucer clubs three and four hundred miles



from his home. He turned out to be a popular speaker, and one night in Toledo, Ohio, after describing his plans to build a space ship, he was asked if he would consider enlarging the project to include more passengers. Gordon agreed that this would be a splendid idea and, in 1967, the Institute for Cosmic Research was formed and chartered by the state of Michigan as a nonprofit organization "dedicated to the advancement of religion, science, and space travel."

Membership

Early members were drawn from friendship cliques that extended into informal flying saucer study groups and small flying saucer cults devoted to nationally known contactees. There were three of the latter: the Aetherius Society (George King), the Interplanetary Space Center (Laura Mundo), and Understanding Unlimited (Daniel Fry). Members also came from occult and metaphysical groups like the Rosicrucians, the I Am, and the Self-Realization Fellowship. During the period 1971-1975, when we did the bulk of our research, the Institute had about one hundred members, perhaps half of which could be considered "active." A strict membership list was maintained. New members were carefully selected: candidates were sponsored by established members and prospects with desired skills were preferentially recruited. All members paid seven dollars annual dues which entitled them to work on the flying saucer (known as the "Bluebird") and to receive an irregularly published newsletter. Over the years the newsletter took on the characteristics of semi-sacred scripture.

The Construction Site

The Bluebird was located in a protected backwoods area near Gordon's rural home. A dozen members lived close by; others would have too, if they could have found employment. Several people bought nearby property (from Gordon) indicating future plans to move into the community. Those that did not live in the area had to make long pilgrimages from their urban homes, a six hundred mile round trip. Understandably, most members made the trip infrequently, but a hardy few did so every third or fourth weekend, weather permitting.

When members came to the construction site they worked on the Bluebird in the daytime and gathered at Gordon's home at night. With his followers assembled around his kitchen table, Gordon tirelessly told his stories. What listeners heard was a cosmology that appeared bizarre and disconnected at first, but with some perseverance, became intelligible and orderly. For various reasons, few people took the time to understand the total system, thereby heightening the sense of mystery.

The Space Brothers Speak

The key to Gordon's cosmology lay in certain revelations that he reports were given to him by friendly extraterrestrials who appeared



one day happily returning an experimental rocket that he had sent into the stratosphere. The space brothers told Gordon that Earth is in perilous straits. It faces another ice age because Earthlings have been violating "Universal Law," the law by which people from more highly evolved planets live. The space brothers announced that Earth's vortex is about to break because of an excess amount of hatred on the planet. Planets are like plants, the visitors explained: give them love and they prosper; give them hate and they die. Earth is reacting to an overload of hatred and the inhabitants of other planets in the solar system are alarmed because if Earth disintegrates, the balance of the solar system will be destroyed.

But there is hope. If Earthlings will change their ways the ice age will be avoided and the planet will be turned into a "Heaven on Earth." The space brothers had a plan. They chose to provide Gordon with the technology to build a small flying saucer. In turn, Gordon was to round up a group of highly evolved Earthlings who practice Universal Law, build the saucer, and fly it into the skies. At this point Gordon and his crew would be joined by saucers from other planets. Together they would circle Earth for three days, darkening the sky. People would "look up and wonder why"--then fall on their knees and start practicing Universal Law.

The key to space travel, the space brothers revealed, lies in tapping free energy. Powerful "lines of force" exist throughout the universe and cross at right angles forming squares. Within each square is a vortex where free energy is contained. The Bluebird would be an anti-gravity machine that would harness free energy and thread its way through a pathway of vortexes called the "Stairway in the Sky." Continuing their explanation, the space brothers reported that the sun is cold and sends out a "phagon ray." The phagon ray turns oxygen into heat and light. Thus all the "stars" that are seen at night are actually planets glowing with oxygen; they are all inhabited.

Gordon was well prepared for his role in this drama. In a recent past life he was a distinguished scientist on the lost continent of Atlantis. Now, one of seven Great White Brothers, each working in a different country for Earth's salvation, he alone was trusted with the plans for building the Bluebird, and therefore was "in charge." Selected audiences were told about his "virgin birth." In this story a flying saucer appeared over his mother's house and Gordon simply "arrived" in his non-pregnant mother's lap wrapped head to toe in white muslin. As the evening rolled on, members heard tales of heroic encounters with communists, the Mafia, Black Panthers, and humanoids from Pluto who were after his secrets.¹¹ On the brighter side were stories of visits from the space brothers from Io (a satellite of Jupiter that Gordon preferred to refer to as a planet). They ate meals at his home and played with his children. They protected him by monitoring the conversations and thoughts of visitors at his home. The space brothers also kept "complete records" of Institute members.



In 1968 Gordon allegedly went to Io where, according to one newsletter, he had "fantastic adventures." He reported that he represented Earth at "Intergalactic Council meetings," and to the obvious delight of many, he darkly suggested that some Institute members may secretly be space people. These imaginative tales were liberally embedded with occult motifs: telepathy, astral projection, pyramidology, the hollow earth legend, the pineal gland, Music of the Spheres, the "real Bible from Tibet," reincarnation, the human aura, and alchemy.

Three Subcultures

Members responded in different ways to Gordon and the idea of building a flying saucer. Three subcultures, each with its distinctive subjective orientation, can be isolated: (1) a religious subculture that had the status of an epistemic community, (2) a technical subculture of persons interested in the mechanics of building an anti-gravity machine, and (3) an occult subculture that included the construction of the Bluebird as one of several fascinations. These subcultures, while analytically distinct, were empirically interpenetrating. The religious subculture dominated the other two when they came into contact with each other, but the existence of all three subcultures--and all three were necessary for the success of the entire system--depended on an allocation of segregated times and locations where each could flourish.

The Religious Subculture

Several members, including everyone who lived around the construction site and perhaps a dozen who lived in Detroit, shared a religious orientation. Some were middle-class women, well established in the group; the others were relatively new members (mostly male) in their early twenties. They were united in a common mood of devotion and uncritical acceptance of Gordon as their charismatic leader.

Ironically, members of the religious subculture showed little interest in the construction of the Bluebird and, as a rule, only offered their services when requested. Some worked on plans to build a residential lodge and a printing press, both of which, it was thought, would be necessary when the Bluebird flew and the Institute became a tourist attraction. But the religionists' greatest contribution was their acceptance of Gordon's world view, which strengthened his position as leader and undisputed interpreter of reality. Members were stratified according to their ability to contribute in that fashion.

The highest stratum was the witnesses who testified to miracles. Examples included an over-the-telephone healing of a baby's night-time fever, a four-person sighting of an extraterrestrial "mothership," and various reports of receiving "good vibrations," and even an electrical charge, from the center pole of a fifteen-foot pyramid that was the personal property of one of the more imaginative cult members. Gordon also alluded to other "unavailable" witnesses who reportedly met hu-



manoids and saw him turn base metals into gold.

Next came a stratum of verifiers unable to have psychic experiences but ready to contribute by asking Gordon the "right questions" and by showing approval of his answers. During kitchen table discussions Gordon focused his attention on his most trusted verifier when he spoke. For this reason it was possible to rank-order verifiers by observing sociometric patterns during these discussions.

Last came the neophytes who were unfamiliar with Gordon's ideas but, for various reasons, were eager to learn about them. Some neophytes obviously were looking for a cheap thrill, a chance to talk to a man who claims to speak with space people and a chance to help build a flying saucer. There were so many of these people passing through that Gordon's adult son Ronald once remarked that he did not bother to learn their names.

The Technical Subculture

A second community consisted of members who were primarily interested in flying saucers and in building the Bluebird. The Bluebird was not only their dream, it was a monument in plastic, wood, and non-ferrous metal. It was also a creative outlet for talented craftsmen. The forty-foot-wide ship was housed in its own attractive hangar--itself a major architectural achievement. Twin flanges promised to spin in opposite directions on a thirty-two-foot bearing (the largest bearing in the world!). A sophisticated transmission, immodestly valued at one hundred thousand dollars, was installed. The final assembly awaited the installation of the anti-gravity motor that Gordon claimed to have in his secret basement laboratory but never produced.

Gordon was not the leader of the technical community and therefore did not spend much time in the hangar. Soon after the construction of the ship got underway, it became obvious that he was not prepared to solve the day-to-day engineering problems (there was no blueprint) nor to supervise the work of others. The task finally fell to Jim, the owner of a machine shop. Jim had two friends who also owned their own machine shops in Detroit. Jim's brother-in-law, while not a member, was another person who owned a machine shop in Detroit and cooperated with the Institute. The actual manufacture of many parts of the Bluebird occurred in these Detroit shops. The parts later were transported to the hangar for final assembly.

A second stratum, composed of skilled craftsmen, including a custom carpenter and an upholsterer, worked under the direction of the machine shop owners. These workers were followed by a third stratum of mechanically inclined, semi-skilled technicians and a fourth stratum of undistinguished, but willing, laborers.

Members of the technical subculture were interested in the day-to-day problems of building the ship--stress relief (for which one



member held a patent), how to hang styrofoam on the frame of the upper flange, and seeing that the transmission was properly mounted and that it turned freely. What they, almost without exception, were not interested in, was Gordon's cosmology. Responding to normative pressure, however, they seldom challenged his claims, adopting instead a "let's pretend" attitude--at least during his lectures. They generally limited their questions to the subject of space travel.

The Occult Subculture

A third orientation was exhibited by some twenty-five to thirty Institute members who met regularly at Jim's Detroit home. These meetings were originally designed to inform Detroit members, who infrequently traveled to the construction site, of the progress of the construction. New members were brought to these meetings and shown photographs of "the project" and new parts manufactured at the Detroit machine shops. A second activity was the "study" of Gordon's newsletters and fellow contactee George Adamski's¹² course on telepathy.

By the summer of 1973 disenchantment with the progress of the Bluebird's construction was expressed at these meetings and rival occultisms were discussed. The Detroit chapter of the Institute quickly became just another occult discussion group. The most prestigious members of this group were three veteran occult virtuosos who for years had been active in the Detroit Rosicrucian and Theosophical circles. Next in rank were younger occultists who favored contemporary occult and metaphysical systems like Transcendental Meditation and Silva Mind Control. Last were newcomers, untutored in occult belief systems, concepts, and argot. By this time the Institute for Cosmic Research was out of favor and, at best, was tolerated as a subject for discussion.

Showdown

Meanwhile, back at his Upper Peninsula home, Gordon was informed by members of the occult subculture who remained loyal to him of the developing heresy in Detroit. Being three hundred miles away he was in poor position to maintain control. Finally, on 1 March 1974, Gordon came to Detroit for a showdown. The occasion was the Institute's annual open-to-the-public mass meeting. That evening Gordon was well prepared. Following painfully overrehearsed introductions by three disciples, he coolly told an astonished crowd of eighty persons that he had a secret revelation in 1962 that foretold "everything that would happen until the summer of 1974...street riots, gas and fuel shortages...." Furthermore, he announced that in 1962 he built a machine that could convert water into "practically anything you want.... acid, energy for homes, automobiles...."

For twelve years, the startled audience now learned, Gordon had been waiting for the space brothers' okay to construct new machines--machines that were more advanced than their now suddenly insignificant



flying saucer. Condescendingly, Gordon acknowledged that many people were anxious to "come out with the free energy machine." But," he explained, "I held them back because I had to go along with this revelation.... In 1962 I didn't know if the new machine would come first. I was to wait for a sign and that sign came...." "Tim, a college student," Gordon continued, "found the sign by accident. It was an unusual ground configuration that he sighted while flying an airplane around the Upper Peninsula."

Excited by these revelations, the audience exploded with questions...

Q. Can you tell us what the sign meant?

A. Yes, this was the sign of creation.... It described how the machine works, how the pyramids work, how the world works.

Q. Is it still there?

A. Yes, it is still there--ah--there aren't any tracks to it.... I sent some boys to check it. There were even earthen pots set in certain sections representing the moon and such things. Everything was according to Hoyle.

Q. Is that in Michigan?

A. It isn't far from where I live.

Q. Was it quite new?

A. Yes, it was burnt into the ground. There was grass on the side burnt down to an inch or less. Burnt with acid or radiation.

Q. Was it anything like Adamski received from the space people?¹³

A. No, not at all.... That was part of it; he received signs all right. But this was the sign of all creation--lines of force--the circle in the square--the whole thing.... This area was all checked out. There were no tractor tracks, no truck tracks, car tracks. There hadn't been anyone there before the boys got there. It was a huge sign. There was even a roadway cut away from the sign showing a road into civilization.... It even had a spring in that road and all around it shows the water that was used in this machine. Someday I'll let you see it. It won't be long.

Q. What does the sign signify?

A. I had a revelation in 1962. I was to wait for a sign to bring out this new type energy. Now, I've had the energy to



run an anti-gravity machine, as you know--you've worked on it--but I wasn't allowed to use this new type machine until I had a sign from above. And I've been waiting all these years. I was told the world would be conditioned. As you know we have the Watergate affair. We have a shortage of energy as they say. Let's say the world is being conditioned.

Q. Gordon, what is your impression of Silva Mind Control?

A. I never read anything about it but I can tell you where the word "silva" comes from. It goes all the way back to Atlantis. Silva means NEGATIVE NOVA FORCE. So you can take it from there, any way you want to.

This was Gordon at his best. He checkmated the insurgents and gave the faithful new mysteries to contemplate. He introduced Dennis, an attentive twenty-two-year-old student, as the new leader at "Detroit area operations" (even though Dennis lived two hundred miles from Detroit). And finally he ended the meeting by doubling membership dues, announcing the termination of his irregularly published newsletter, and by taking prepublication orders for a book he was yet to complete.

With Silva Mind Control discredited, and with it, by implication, all competing occult and metaphysical systems, Detroit members saw no clear way to participate in the Institute. They could not help construct the new mystery machines like they had helped construct the flying saucer. (Gordon side-stepped a question about how much involvement could take place.) Some members, who had found a way to earn a living in the Upper Peninsula, formed a small religious colony around Gordon's home; but being tied to jobs and mortgages in Detroit, this was not a reasonable possibility for most members.

The increased membership dues were collected immediately but only twenty persons were willing to pay; the others suddenly became "outsiders." And with transformed goals and a shake up in leadership, the Institute for Cosmic Research was no more. For four and one-half more years, when we terminated our research, Gordon directed a new cult based on a mysterious water machine that he allegedly was perfecting. And the old members who had given so much to the construction of the flying saucer gathered their forces long enough to file an unsuccessful lawsuit against Gordon, held two reunion meetings, and then disbanded, seeing each other only informally in friendship cliques.

Multiple Realities and Social Organization

The real story of the Institute for Cosmic Research lies in the fact that it held together for seven years and accomplished so much. The explanation for this is two-fold: (1) the requirements of the organization, considered as a social system, were satisfied, and (2) sources of stress and internal disruption were effectively contained.



The Bluebird was the focal point of the organization and as long as members were not disenchanted with progress on its construction, the organization hung together. An unlikely assembly of technically oriented workers carried out its construction to virtual completion. Work on the project was legitimated by Gordon and the religious community. And finally, in its early stages, the occult subculture was a source for recruiting and socializing new personnel.

Ability to participate in each of these subcultures depended on the repertoire of orientations (mental universes) that each participant had. The capacity of members to participate in the three subcultures was determined by how the skills and orientations they had available matched the demands of the situation. The occult virtuoso, being able to distinguish between several methods of mediation, would outrank the newcomer to the occult culture but that same person, being only semi-skilled in technical abilities, would take orders from a machine shop owner while working at the hangar; and if the same person was untutored in Gordon's religious scheme, he/she would play a minor role in Gordon's kitchen table ceremonies. Many other possibilities can be imagined. In actual practice the technical and occult communities were most commonly alligned. And while some high status religionists were active in the occult subculture, they seldom played but minor roles in the community of technicians.

A built-in tension between the three subcultures existed but was contained by segregating activities by time and space. The religionists' domain was Gordon's kitchen; the technicians' domain was the hangar; and the occultists' domain was Jim's Detroit, pine-paneled basement. When all three communities met together, as they did in annual open-to-the-public meetings, the religious definition of the situation prevailed. This system worked well until the tension no longer was manageable, Gordon expelled the technicians and occultists, and the cult collapsed.



NOTES

1. Goffman, (1956) 1959:18.
2. The Institute for Cosmic Science is a pseudonym and the names of its participants have also been changed.
3. Weber, (1922) 1963:54-55.
4. Wallis, 1974.
5. Holzner, 1968:60-72.
6. James, 1893, chapter 21.
7. See Wallis, 1974; Festinger, Riecken and Schachter, 1956; Buckner, (1965) 1968; McNeece, 1975; Balch and Taylor, 1976. Ironically, people who purchase books about flying saucer contactees sold by the Saucerian Press, Clarksburg, West Virginia, typically do not belong to flying saucer cults or express interest in occultisms. See Stupple, 1977.
8. Truzzi, 1972:9.
9. Nebel, (1961) 1962:71.
10. A close look at the photographs shows a wire attached to each "airborne" spaceship. Obviously these defects could have been removed by manipulations; the fact that this was not done and that the photographs still convinced many people suggests that Institute members were more than willing to believe. One cynical former member produced a magazine which showed how the amazing "free energy light" could be purchased through the mail.
11. According to Gordon, Pluto and Earth are the lowest evolved planets in our solar system. Plutonians are more highly evolved technically, but not spiritually, than Earthlings. They have spaceships and are considered dangerous. Institute members are cautioned to avoid Plutonian ships (which smell like sulphur) ← because they capture Earthlings and use them for sexual experiments. Spaceships from other planets smell like clover and ozone; they are not to be feared.
12. Adamski, 1958. Gordon claimed to be an associate of George Adamski, historically the most important contactee.
13. Adamski and Leslie, 1953:185-216. Adamski, in a famous alleged encounter with a Venusian on a California desert, received a cryptic message in the sand. See also George Hunt Williamson, 1953:95-151.



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