

THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION TO THE UFO PHENOMENON**TED PETERS Copyright 1979**

Do unidentified flying objects have anything to do with religion? Many voices are saying so. Sociologist Andrew Greeley says UFOs along with science fiction give us something which our modern churches have lost, namely, a sense of "wonder." Famed psychoanalyst, Carl Jung, wrote twenty years ago that flying saucers represent collective psychic distress and the desire for supernatural salvation. Carl Sagan, Cornell University exobiologist who directed the search for life on the Viking probe of Mars, says with derision that UFO believers project religious fantasies onto phenomena that only science can fully explain. Sagan is not alone. Many skeptics think they have dealt the death blow to UFOs by hurling phrases such as "true believers," "religious kooks," and "lunatic fringe."

But these identifications of UFOs with religion are often haphazard, superficial, and slanderous. If there is a connection between UFOs and religion, then the time is ripe for a serious scholarly study of the matter. I have been teaching in the fields of Religious Studies and Theology for a number of years, and I have been interested in UFOs since 1950. It occurred to me in 1973 to see if and how these two subjects are related. After much research and thought, it has become my own judgment that there is in fact a religious dimension to the UFO phenomenon. It takes the form of a covert system of symbols evoking in us a sense of (1) transcendence, (2) omniscience, (3) perfection, and (4) salvation.

By the term "religion" here I do not mean conventional denominational or institutional religion per se. I refer more widely to the general religious dimensions to life as a whole which are perhaps more clearly symbolized in ancient cultures than in our modern non-religious society. My method is first of all that found in the discipline of Phenomenology of Religion, a method which makes observations and describes phenomena without requiring a faith commitment on the part of the observer; nor does it require a commitment one way or the other regarding the objective reality of the UFO. I do have a faith commitment to God, however, and I plan to offer my own assessment of the theological significance of UFOs at the conclusion of this paper. I also affirm the objective reality of some UFOs, but I will not argue for that here. In this presentation we will concern ourselves only with the religious connection.



1. TRANSCENDENCE

UFOs convey the sense of transcendence. This is due to their obvious association with the sky, with heaven, with the mathematical infinity of outer space. Infinity fills us with a sense of awe and holiness.

Lay on the beach on a clear day and look from horizon to horizon. Meditate. Allow yourself to be impressed by what you see: a sky that is high, majestic, immovable, and powerful. That sky is seen as holy in almost every religious tradition.¹ The ancient Chinese word T'ien means "heaven;" it also means "the god who rules heaven." The mighty warrior gods of mythology such as Zeus, Thor, Baal, and Indra were gods of sky and thunder. In the Old Testament God is often referred to as El-Elyon, "The Lord Most High." In English the word "heaven" means both sky and the place where God dwells. Jesus taught us to pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven."

But we modern people have fooled ourselves into believing that we can no longer believe the sky is holy. We humans have conquered the sky. We watch the evening news, and no matter how often the meteorologist is wrong in his or her weather forecasts, we think that the sky is not capricious but rather subject to human calculation and prediction. We have built supersonic jet passenger planes that cruise about the heavens as if they belonged to our own backyard. The sky has shrunk in our consciousness to a thin envelope of atmosphere containing our little earth. We cannot believe in gods like Zeus or the Father of Jesus if they rule such a puny and vulnerable heaven as our local atmosphere.

We moderns think we have conquered the sky; but, in fact, behind it we have only found another sky. There is a new source for that feeling of transcendence, namely, outer space. The commonly used adjective, "astronomical," connotes the mind-boggling mathematics that accompany our awareness of the immensity of space separating the stars and galaxies. Outer space provides a new sense of infinity and awe.

This is where the UFO picks up its religious baggage, its quality of transcendence. In the popular mind belief in flying saucers is synonymous with belief in extraterrestrial and even extrasolar visitation. A subtle or covert logic is a work. We believe that a being who is capable of traversing such unfathomable distances is not simply slightly more advanced technologically than we are; no, we rank such a being with Zeus or Thor. The UFO has mastered the sky, conquered infinity. The UFO is mysterious and majestic. It humbles us by reminding us of our earthbound limitations, of our inadequacies, of our finitude.

In the Columbia Pictures extravaganza, "Close Encounters of the Third Kind," the sky symbolism and communication of transcendent power is overwhelming. The space visitors do not just fly around in our



sky; they control it. They make the clouds foment, lightning flash and thunder roar. In this movie the gods Zeus and Thor have returned in the form of a technological wonder visiting us from a mystifying realm transcendent to our world of understanding. Whether or not real UFOs behave this way is beside the point. That the movie's director Spielberg sensed that the impact of UFOs could be portrayed with sky symbolism and transcendence is a credit to his perception of the phenomenon.

2. OMNISCIENCE

The second form of religious symbolism attached to UFOs is omniscience. "Omniscience" in classical theology refers to the ability of God to know all things. UFOs have this ability as well.

First of all, they are believed to be further advanced in technological learning. But there is much more. Not only are these creatures intelligent enough to traverse the immense distances of interstellar space, but they possess intimate knowledge of earth as well. UFO witnesses often feel that they were somehow singled out for the contact. In some cases I have personally investigated, the witnesses said that a flying saucer occupant called them by name. How did the space aliens come to know our names?

One way the UFOonauts obtain this superhuman knowledge is through electronic surveillance. I have had numerous conversations with Charles Hickson, one of the two Pascagoula, Mississippi, fishermen who were allegedly taken aboard a hovering flying saucer by three robot-like creatures on October 11, 1973. Mr. Hickson told me the space aliens have placed in his body an electronic transmitter that allows them to monitor his every activity. Even our interview conversation was being overheard by astronauts somewhere in orbit.

St. Augustine is famous for saying, "God is closer to me than I am to myself, hence he knows me better than I do." We find this theme in the UFO phenomenon too. Beings from Venus showed George Adamski a TV screen on which they could watch activity taking place anywhere on earth. A man from Saturn told Adamski, "We understand you people better than most of you know yourselves."² Referring to telepathy, a Martian told Daniel Fry, "I am afraid I ransacked your mind as perhaps no mind has ever been ransacked before. I think I can fairly say that I know much more about you than you know about yourself."³

The divine omniscience which searches the heart is most dramatically testified to in a case examined by Carl Jung, wherein the UFOonauts say to Orfeo Angelucci:

We see the individuals of earth as each one really is, Orfeo, and not as perceived by the limited senses of man. The people of your planet have been under observation for centuries, but have only recently been re-surveyed. Every point of progress



in your society is registered with us. We know you as you do not know yourselves. Every man, woman and child is recorded in vital statistics by means of our crystal disks. Each of you is infinitely more important to us than to fellow Earthlings because you are not aware of the true mystery of your being.⁴

What is missing in a world that is understood strictly in terms of the sterile and impersonal laws of nature is the abiding presence of God's spirit. We do not want to be alone. In the old-time religion we could count on angels as God's invisible agents to watch our every move and protect us from danger. God's omniscience and heavenly angels met a deep inner religious need then. To be told by modern natural science that angels do not exist is a great loss.

But with UFOs angels are back again, not as spirits but as physical beings, with electronic surveillance and telepathic insight. It is comforting to know once again that we are not alone. Someone is watching.

3. PERFECTION

Carl Jung says the round shape of the flying saucer represents the archetypal mandala, the symbol of perfection in many religious traditions. In Christianity we find it in the form of the halo. Jung writes, "There is an old saying that God is a circle whose center is everywhere and the circumference is nowhere. God in his omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence requires a totality symbol par excellence, something round, complete, and perfect. Epiphanies of this sort are, in the tradition, often associated with fire and light. On the antique level, therefore, the UFOs could easily be conceived as gods."⁵

Although many UFOs are in fact circular in shape, many are not. But there is evidence in addition to the shape that demonstrates how UFOs communicate to us the sense of perfection.

It is our own thinking process which creates the image of perfection. We assume that because the extraterrestrials are able to get here when we are unable to get there, this means they are more advanced than we in technology. Perhaps they have evolved longer than we. Perhaps they have progressed further. Perhaps they have arrived at a higher plane of existence.

Then we draw a subtle but wholly unwarranted conclusion: we associate technological advance with moral advance. We conclude that the outerspace visitors are morally superior to us. Perhaps they are at the final stage of moral development, i.e., perfection.

How primitive we look in comparison! We on earth argue and scuffle over petty antagonisms, while our celestial observers look on with pity and love. UFO believers usually assert that extraterrestrial civilizations have learned to harness nuclear processes for humanitarian



purposes, to avoid self-destruction through war or pollution, and to live in peace and brotherhood with one another and with nature. Evangelist Billy Graham articulates this view when he says the space aliens may have found answers to the problems besetting us on earth, such as disease, war and environmental pollution.⁶ When aliens come into contact with us it is the perfect confronting the imperfect, the innocent confronting the sinful, the advanced confronting the underdeveloped.

Eternity is a quality of perfection, and the concern for eternity comes up repeatedly in UFO accounts as the concern for age. It is assumed that technological advances in medical science have enabled these extraterrestrials to greatly extend their life span. One of the famous contactees of the 1960's, Howard Menger, recounts how he encountered a beautiful spacewoman--would we expect her to be homely?--who appeared to be about 25 years old. She told young Howard that she was more than 500.⁷ This is practically the equivalent of immortality. One bold UFO speculator, R.L. Dione, believes the extraterrestrials have through medical science discovered how to live forever.⁸

The Western biblical tradition to which we are heirs understands both the shortening of life (Genesis 6:3) and its termination in death (Romans 5:12) as the result of sin. It follows that if these extraterrestrials have great longevity or even immortality, then they either never had sin or are gradually outgrowing it. Not only are they more advanced than we technologically, but morally as well. They represent a level of perfection that stands over against us as judge and lure.

4. REDEMPTION

The fourth religious quality of the UFO is that it can become the object of human hope. For many it is a potential redeemer. I call it the "celestial savior."⁹ It offers the rough equivalent of salvation or, in the words of many contemporary religion scholars, the means for "ultimate transformation."¹⁰

One of the salient themes of the great era of the contactees in the 1950s and early 1960s was atomic weaponry testing. The chills of the cold war were not alleviated by the prospect of frying ourselves in a nuclear holocaust.

In addition to the cold war, Jung suggests that the prodigious increase of the world's population and the growing awareness of insufficient resources to support humankind also contribute to this emotional tension. "Congestion creates fear, which looks for help from extraterrestrial sources, since it cannot be found on earth."¹¹ Such psychic tension issues in the unconscious call for a Messiah to deliver us from our impending catastrophe. Jung writes, "The present situation is calculated as never before to arouse expectations of a redeeming, supernatural event."¹²



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For more than a decade, figures like George Adamski and Daniel Fry went about the country lecturing to large audiences on messages they claimed to have received from flying saucer occupants. The message was simple: We earthlings must put away our nuclear weapons of war and cultivate a planetwide brotherhood consisting of mutual understanding and love. The space visitors have come to aid us in achieving this end, an end we have been unable to achieve on our own. The UFO's represent the dawn of a new Aquarian age in which the perfection they already possess will be passed along to us.

And there is even a genre of flying saucer poetry on the theme of redemption. In 1958 a superterrestrial brother by the name of Hukar delivered his verse to the human race in care of an earthling by the name of John C. Hoffman:

Our reason for coming, is to try to recover from old Mother
Earth, our dear long lost Brothers...
There are many things of value,
Some of which the eye can see.
But the priceless gift that we offer to you,
Is the Redeemer's love for free.

This hope comes to expression in "Close Encounters of the Third Kind." The dramatic climax of the film could have been taken directly from the closing pages of the Book of Revelation in the Bible. The UFO encountered in the final scene is no ordinary flying saucer. It is a gigantic city, a celestial metropolis. It descends upon earth with all the majesty and opulence befitting the prophesied New Jerusalem: "He took me to the top of an enormous high mountain, and showed me Jerusalem, the holy city, coming down from God out of heaven. It had all the radiant glory of God and glittered like some precious jewel...." (Revelation 21) The film's color and drama offer an apocalyptic phantasmagoria portraying our hoped-for superterrestrial redemption.

THEOLOGY AND EXTRATERRESTRIAL LIFE

We have observed that contemporary UFOs resonate with a covert religious symbol system. They elicit in us feelings tied to transcendence, omniscience, perfection, and redemption. Now, we might ask, do UFOs raise any specifically theological questions? I would like to address three such questions: (1) does scripturally based theology permit belief in extraterrestrial intelligent life? (2) how should we respond to the message of UFOs? and (3) can UFOs become idols?

It is often asked: will the Church permit us to believe in extraterrestrial life? Formulated this way, it is a silly question. The only thing that will rightly permit us to believe in extraterrestrial life will be evidence or proof. Whether or not space beings exist will be determined by the facts, not by what we choose to believe. Open-



mindfulness is the only intellectually honest position on this question. The Church does not oppose intellectual honesty this day and age.

Contrary to what is most often said, there is no conflict with Church doctrine on this issue. It is frequently argued that should we discover extraterrestrial intelligent life it will mean disaster for traditional religion on earth. Some contend that Jewish and Christian beliefs will dissolve and have to be replaced by new doctrines centered around the aliens and their significance. This argument assumes that our religion is parochial and depends upon the belief that the human race on earth is either unique or the highest form of sentient life.

But this is patently not the case. The uniqueness or superiority of humankind has never been a fundamental tenet of Christian thought. Roman Catholic theologians have occasionally spoken openly of extraterrestrial beings as part of God's creation. Francis J. Connell, C.Ss.R., former dean of the School of Sacred Theology at the Catholic University of America, once said: "It is good for Catholics to know that the principles of their faith are entirely compatible with the most startling possibilities concerning life on other planets."¹³ L. C. McHugh, a Jesuit journalist, wrote in America that he believed not only in the possibility of extraterrestrial races but that for each world there could be its own incarnation parallel to our Christ. The president of Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans, the Rev. J. Edgar Bruns, has written that intelligent beings inhabiting other planets could be fitted into Christian theology.

The same is true in the Protestant camp. Paul Tillich explained the possibility of God's redemptive word among extraterrestrial civilizations when writing his Systematic Theology. And last year Billy Graham told The National Enquirer: "I firmly believe there are intelligent beings like us far away in space who worship God. But we would have nothing to fear from meeting these people. Like us, they are God's creation."¹⁴

SHOULD WE HEED THE UFO MESSAGE?

The message the UFOs bring us is certainly a message the human race needs to hear. It is a message of love, brotherhood, and peace on earth.

On Saturday, November 26, 1977, something unprecedented happened during a broadcast of the South England Television Network. About 5:00pm, the regular programming was interrupted. A strange voice was heard to declare, "This is the voice of Asteron." Asteron claimed to represent an inter-galactic association which is deeply concerned about our welfare on earth. He went on to warn us that we have only a short time to live. To avoid total annihilation, we must put away our weapons of war, embrace one another, and learn to live together in



peace. After six minutes the transmission ended.

The TV station was bombarded by its frightened audience. A mood of panic gripped the viewers. Officials at the network set about an investigation. The following Tuesday I heard a news broadcaster reporting the public statement of a network spokesman. Asteron's message that we should put down our weapons of war and strive for world peace was the result of a hoax, and the spokesman guaranteed that that message would not be heard again on that station.

Ironic, but sad. It was a good message, regardless of the source. If anyone on earth tells us to embrace one another in love and strive for world peace, that person is a messenger from God. Whether UFOs are fact or fiction, real or unreal, if they bring us such a message, I believe we should listen.

POSSIBLE UFOLATRY?

Neither traditional theology nor the established church hierarchy is likely to crumble with the advent of even the most startling UFO revelations. But there should be a note of caution. As people begin to make an emotional investment in UFOs and pin their hopes upon them, the situation is ripe for idolatry. In this case, we may call it "ufolatry".

An important ingredient in the Hebrew and Christian faiths is trust in God. Whatever we trust we worship. To trust in anything other than God Himself is to violate the First Commandment. It places an idol before God.

We have learned to place a great deal of trust and confidence in technology to solve our practical problems during this century. There is a constant temptation to elevate technology, to view it as the solver of our moral and spiritual problems, as well as the practical. UFOs present our imaginations with the possibility of a superterrestrial technology dedicated to meeting all our moral and spiritual needs. How we wish they could end war, stimulate love and brotherhood, provide peace on earth. But these are problems concerning the relationship between the human heart and the divine will. They can be solved only through God's work in our lives. No technology can do it, whether it be terrestrial or extraterrestrial. To place one's trust in UFOs is to build a house on sand.

UFOs resonate within our culture with a disguised symbolism making us aware that our religious sensibilities are still alive and well within our secularized and technologized culture. But there is still reason for caution. UFOs may represent an unconscious hope that technology will save us from all our ills. But such a hope fails to recognize that some of our ills are due to problems with the human heart. From these God and God alone is able to deliver us.



NOTES

1. See Mircea Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion (New York: World, Meridian, 1963) pp. 39f; and The Sacred and the Profane (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1957) pp. 118f.
2. George Adamski, Inside the Spaceships (New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1955) p. 39.
3. Daniel Fry, The White Sands Incident (Louisville: Best Books, 1966) p. 46.
4. Orfeo Angelucci, The Secret of the Saucers (Amherst, Wisconsin: Amherst Press, 1955) cited by Carl Jung; my italics.
5. Carl Jung, Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Sky, tr. by R.F.C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959) p.21.
6. See article on Billy Graham in National Enquirer, November 30, 1976.
7. Howard Menger, From Outer Space (New York: Pyramid, 1959) p.46.
8. R.L. Dione, God Drives a Flying Saucer (New York: Bantam, 1969) p.viii.
9. Ted Peters, UFOs--God's Chariots? (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977) Chap. 7.
10. Robert S. Ellwood, Jr., Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973) pp.5-11
11. Jung, Flying Saucers, p.15.
12. Ibid., p.21.
13. Francis J. Connell, C.Ss.R., "Flying Saucers and Theology", in The Truth about Flying Saucers, by Aime Michel (New York: Pyramid, 1956) p.258.
14. National Enquirer, November 30, 1976.