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Spiritualists, Aliens and UFOs: Extraterrestrials as Spirit Guides

JENNIFER E. PORTER

ABSTRACT *One of the most striking innovations within contemporary North American Spiritualism is the adoption of extraterrestrials as spirit guides by some contemporary Spiritualists. It is here that the New Age fascination with extraterrestrials and UFOs has taken on a uniquely Spiritualist form. Extraterrestrials have come to represent for many Spiritualists the successful achievement of the ultimate Spiritualist goal: the union between spirituality and science. Extraterrestrials are seen as spiritually superior to us because their science exceeds our own; their 'science' is perceived superior because it incorporates recognition of spiritual 'truth'. Consequently, within the North American Spiritualist context, the adoption of extraterrestrials as spirit guides can be seen both as a 'rationalisation' of Spiritualist belief through a strong idealisation of 'science', and as a critique of orthodox science for ignoring the 'spiritual' realm. For several of the Spiritualists with whom I worked, extraterrestrials have consequently become excellent choices for spirit guides.*

Introduction

It is a common lament among contemporary Spiritualists that the New Age Movement is not 'new' at all: "we've been doing that for one hundred and fifty years" insisted one elderly Spiritualist woman in reference to channelling, "only we call it message-work!" Certainly, the historical debt owed to Spiritualism by the New Age Movement has not gone unrecognised. What has largely gone unnoticed or ignored to date, however, is the reciprocal influence that New Age elements are having on 'progressive' Spiritualist belief. Drawing upon 2 years of field observation with Spiritualists from the southern Ontario/Upper New York State area, this paper seeks to explore the influence of one such New Age element. One of the most striking and surprising innovations within contemporary North American Spiritualism is the incorporation of extraterrestrials as spirit guides by some contemporary Spiritualists. It is here that the New Age fascination with UFO sightings and alien abductions takes on a uniquely Spiritualist form. Within the contemporary Spiritualist context, extraterrestrials have come to represent for some Spiritualists the successful achievement of the ultimate Spiritualist goal: union between spirituality and science. As such, for several of the Spiritualists with whom I worked, extraterrestrials have become excellent choices for spirit guides.

Spiritualism and Science

Spiritualism is a religious movement based on communication with the spirits of the dead. It originated in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century in part as a reaction to the sweeping technological, scientific and social changes of the period. Contemporaries were confronted with burgeoning scientific and technological innovations that, while of great fascination for many nineteenth century Americans, were as yet poorly understood. Many watched with dismay as these innovations began to undermine the accepted foundations of established religious doctrines. As historian R. Lawrence Moore notes, communication with spirits became "one way in which the generations whose social patterns were most shaken by the changes wrought by science and technology reanchored themselves; at the same time, [it] made the very real miracles of science and technology less incredible" (Moore, 1977: 5).

Spiritualism itself began in 1848, when two little girls played 'repeat after me' with the ghost they believed to be haunting their Hydesville, New York, cottage. According to Spiritualist histories, on the evening of March 31, 1848, the youngest Fox daughter, Kate, aged 12, challenged the 'ghost' by shouting out, "Mr Splitfoot, do as I do!" and clapping her hands. When the mysterious rapper duplicated the number of claps, the Fox family were convinced that the mysterious noises were caused by supernatural means. A system of communication was established by which the 'rapper' could answer questions by varying the number of knocks it produced.¹ The 'rapper' proceeded to pass along details about the pasts and private lives of family, friends and neighbours that presumably only a ghost or spirit could possibly know. Within a year, as word of this phenomenon spread, hundreds of 'seance' circles were established to attempt further communication with the spirits of the dead. Within 5 years, there were a conservatively estimated one million Spiritualists within the United States alone (Nelson 1969: 5–6), making Spiritualism the fastest growing religious movement in American history.

An integral part of this proliferation of seance circles was the concomitant attempt to 'prove' through scientific means that the ghostly phenomena were, in fact, spiritistic in nature. Beginning with the "Rochester Rappings" Investigation of 1849, scientific investigations into mediumistic phenomena became commonplace. Spiritualist mediums welcomed the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities to scientific investigators, and establishment scientists, such as award-winning chemist Sir William Crookes, Nobel Prize winning physiologist Charles Richet, and noted evolutionary naturalist Alfred Russell Wallace became proponents of Spiritualism as a result of their investigations into mediumistic phenomena.² The mediumistic phenomena available for scientific study remained initially confined to the original 'rapping' phenomena discovered (or developed) by the Fox sisters, and 'tests' of these phenomena consisted of attempts to elicit 'facts' from the spirit sources that the mediums themselves could not have independently known. By the 1850s, however, new phenomena started appearing and new techniques for investigating mediumistic phenomena arose. Within 10 years of the movement's origins, mediums were producing 'materialisations' of spirit matter from their own bodies, while sceptical investigators demanded that mediums be locked into cabinets, tied to chairs, stripped naked (in the case of same-sex audiences), gagged, blindfolded and, in at least one instance, tied

into a sack and nailed to the floor (Braude 1985: 177). Nineteenth century audiences wanted to believe in the possibility of communication with the spirit world, but they also wanted such communication to be empirically and scientifically verified, and were by no means ignorant of opportunities for fraud.

Attempts to unite the increasingly prestigious and authoritative realm of 'science' with faith in a spiritual realm lay at the very core of the Spiritualist religious movement. With the ongoing development of the scientific establishment in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, Spiritualist claims to scientific legitimacy have increasingly been excluded from the domain of orthodox science. To date, scientists have yet to prove the existence of the spirit world. Nevertheless, the prestige and importance that 'science' has held for Spiritualists since the nineteenth century remains undiminished for many contemporary Spiritualists. So too, has the concern of many Spiritualists to integrate 'science' with spirituality.³ Most contemporary North American Spiritualists still insist, for example, that the existence of spirits and the possibility of communication with them is scientifically verifiable, despite orthodox scientific rejection of such Spiritualist claims. Similarly, those Spiritualists who have recently begun to incorporate the figures of extraterrestrials and UFOs into their more traditional religious faith have done so under the clear assumption that belief in such entities is at least potentially compatible with 'science'. Like the Spiritualist belief in the existence of spirits, the existence of UFO's and extraterrestrials remains scientifically unverified.⁴ Nevertheless, the incorporation of extraterrestrials as spiritual guides by some contemporary Spiritualists can be directly attributed to the presumed scientific and technological superiority that extraterrestrials are held to display. This scientific superiority becomes linked in Spiritualist perceptions to a 'spiritual' superiority. Extraterrestrials are seen as spiritually superior because they are scientifically more advanced than human beings. Concurrently, their superior 'science' is perceived as more advanced than ours, because, unlike contemporary earthly science, the science of extraterrestrials incorporates a recognition of spiritual 'truth'. Consequently, within the North American Spiritualist context, the adoption of extraterrestrials as spirit guides can be seen both as a reflection of the 'rationalisation' of Spiritualist belief through the strong idealisation of 'science', and as a critique of orthodox science for ignoring the 'spiritual' realm.

Spiritualism and the New Age

The research for this paper was conducted during 19 months of field observation in 1991–1992 with Spiritualists in Hamilton, Ontario, and in Lily Dale, New York. Hamilton is a working-class steel mill town with a population of 300,000 and two Spiritualist churches—one affiliated with a Christian Spiritualist Association, the other affiliated with the National Spiritualist Association of Churches. Lily Dale is a Spiritualist community with a year round population between 100 and 200 people. The community celebrates a yearly 'summer season' during which believers of all degrees converge on the community from every American State and Canadian province, as well as a few occasional visitors from England and elsewhere. Lily Dale also has two Spiritualist Churches—one affiliated with the National Spiritualist Association of Churches, and the other unaffiliated. Members of both communities and all four churches displayed marked similar-

ities in their acceptance of 'core' Spiritualist beliefs.⁵ Nevertheless, there were a few points on which consensus was lacking. Outstripping debate even on such long-standing contentious issues as reincarnation and Christian doctrine, belief in the existence of extraterrestrials and UFOs was one of those points.

One of the most unexpected findings during the fieldwork period was the discovery that some Spiritualists have recently begun to adopt extraterrestrials as spirit guides.⁶ Although the similarity between Spiritualism and that component of the New Age Movement referred to by sociologist Robert Ellwood (1973, 1992) as "UFO religion" has previously been noted in the academic literature, it was startling to discover the apparent fusion of these two similar, but separate faiths among some contemporary North American Spiritualists. It is important to note, however, that this 'fusion' of faiths has not gone unchallenged by some of the more traditional Spiritualists with whom I worked. The grounds for rejecting such inclusion were frequently based on arguments of 'tradition', but some, like Spiritualist medium Abby, rejected the inclusion of extraterrestrials into Spiritualist faith on 'scientific' grounds. She told me:

I don't believe in [extraterrestrial communication]. I know some [Spiritualists] do, but I don't. Look at all the thousands of reported UFOs that could never be proven. You'd think if it was true, that scientists could have proved it at least once ...

While belief in extraterrestrials cannot yet be considered mainstream within the North American Spiritualist religious tradition, such faith in the ability of scientists to 'prove' things is typical within the Spiritualist context. Generally speaking, however, the parameters of what constitutes acceptable proof are somewhat wider among Spiritualists than within orthodox scientific circles. While scientists decry the poor state of anecdotal evidence and the lack of physical proof for the existence of UFOs, it is often precisely experiential or anecdotal evidence that constitutes acceptable proof within a Spiritualist context. While Abby rejects belief in extraterrestrials because 'science' has failed to 'prove' their existence, others stress that personal experience of contact with such beings constitutes in and of itself 'scientific proof' of their existence. Lily Dale healer and medium Joel, for example, told me that

the nature of Spiritualism almost forces it to incorporate these things, because when the phenomena starts to appear, you just can't avoid it. [Until] about three years ago ... when I had my first encounter, in a meditative state ... with an extraterrestrial ... I had 'poo hoo'd' the whole matter.

According to Ellwood (1973, 1992) and anthropologist David Hess (1993), there are direct connections between the Spiritualism which originated in the nineteenth century, and the development of UFO and extraterrestrial 'cults' in the New Age movement.⁷ Hess (1993: 22) argues that the evolution of New Age thought from its Spiritualist roots has in part entailed a shift from an 'other-worldly' focus on spirit communication among nineteenth century Spiritualists, to the somewhat more 'rationalised' focus on extraterrestrials and UFOs in the New Age movement today.⁸ This shift can be seen as part of what sociologist Eileen Barker (1981) has called the 'rerouting' of religious mystery. She writes:

In the age of science journeys of mystery have been symbolically rerouted. New concepts have emerged with which to explore the beyond ... the absolute formula "I am that I am" is reduced to $E = MC^2$; Cramer gives way to Von Daniken or Stars on Sunday and the Miracle of Lourdes is surpassed by Strange Encounters of the Third Kind. (Barker, 1981: 264.)

To date, the academic literature on 'UFO Religion' has stressed this 'rationalised' focus to the virtual exclusion of other concerns.⁹ However, if Max Weber (1952: 138–139) is correct to situate the process of 'rationalisation' of the modern 'disenchanted' world within attempts to explain the seemingly 'miraculous' in scientific and technological rather than 'supernatural' terms, this emphasis has certainly not been unwarranted. To a large extent, the history of modern 'UFO religion' is the history of attempts to 'explain' the unknown in scientific and technological terms. This has necessarily entailed a strong emphasis on the search for scientific legitimation for the extraterrestrial hypothesis. If UFO's are to be accepted as the product of extraterrestrial science, it becomes of tantamount importance to believers that terrestrial science recognise this fact.

UFOs

The interpretive emphasis on the scientific and technological implications of UFO phenomenon can be traced to Washington in 1947, when deputy sheriff Kenneth Arnold reported seeing nine oddly shaped metallic-looking objects moving like 'saucers skipping over waters'.¹⁰ Since that time, tens of thousands of UFO sighting reports have been made worldwide.¹¹ The fact that about 10% of these sightings have defied conventional explanations and analysis has lent credence to the idea that UFOs are extraterrestrial and technological in origin. As sociologist Jean-Bruno Renard (1990: 93–94) notes, it is only rarely that the popular perception of UFOs as objects of extraterrestrial technology is questioned.¹² An estimated 6000 cases of unexplained UFO sightings have been the subject of major scientific investigation and controversy. Beginning with the US Air Force's classified projects 'Sign', 'Grudge' and 'Blue Book', and culminating in the joint University of Colorado/US Senate Committee's Condon Report in 1968, a consistent effort has been made to investigate and explain UFO phenomena in scientifically acceptable terms.¹³ Three potential 'scientific' explanations have been suggested: UFOs are presumed to be either unknown natural or psychological phenomena, misidentifications of known phenomena or objects of extraterrestrial origin.¹⁴ All three potential explanations have found adherents among the scientific community.¹⁵

With the publication of the influential Condon Report, which stressed the first two explanations of UFO sightings to the exclusion of the third, orthodox scientific investigation into UFO phenomena sharply declined.¹⁶ Nevertheless, full scientific consensus on this issue has remained impossible to achieve. Forty-five years of serious scientific inquiry has lent an aura of tenuous scientific legitimacy to the issue. Even sceptical practitioners of science admit that other intelligent and technologically sophisticated species might exist somewhere in the universe. Well-known astronomer Carl Sagan, for example, has developed a

formula for estimating the number of other intelligent species in our galaxy. He writes:

I will not here run through what numbers have been assigned to the various quantities involved ... [but] we come out with a number of such technical civilizations in the galaxy of about a million: that is, a million other stars with planets on which today there are such advanced civilizations. (Sagan, 1972: 267)

When combined with continuing debate and controversy surrounding the Condon Report's 'mistake or delusion' conclusions, this kind of 'scientific' legitimisation for belief in the existence of extraterrestrial life has been enough to keep the otherwise moribund extraterrestrial hypothesis of UFO origin alive.¹⁷ Whereas the extraterrestrial hypothesis remains somewhat unlikely, if not actually impossible from the perspective of scientific orthodoxy, in popular perception the extraterrestrial hypothesis has, however, become the most apparently logical explanation of the UFO phenomenon.¹⁸ It is this assumption of extraterrestrial origin that underlies the New Age movement's 'UFO religion', and which shapes in turn the Spiritualist incorporation of extraterrestrials as spirit guides.¹⁹

Extraterrestrials, UFOs and Orthodox Science

The failure of orthodox scientists to discount the extraterrestrial hypothesis completely enables some Spiritualists to view the possibility of extraterrestrial existence as scientifically warranted. Toronto medium Michael told me, for example, that

if this universe is as big as it's supposed to be [according to scientists], then to think that we are the centre of the universe is really kind of naive. I mean, really!

Given, therefore, the perception that the existence of extraterrestrials is scientifically valid, the apparent scientific and technological accomplishments of these extraterrestrial visitors can become 'proof' of the technological and scientific superiority of these alien beings. Extraterrestrial space ships, after all, can do things which twentieth century terrestrial scientists declare impossible. According to Hamilton medium Richard, for example, the possession of such technological abilities argues for the existence of a science which far exceeds our own. Only a science which understood the specifics of faster-than-light space travel, for example, could explain the physical structure of observed UFOs. Richard commented:

Space ships, UFOs and stuff like that, that we've sighted and whatnot, they're referred to as cigar shapes or like flattened shapes, which makes sense, 'cause if they're in the perfect shape for space travel then they're in a sphere, but they would have built their sphere to be a sphere at above light speed. So that, if they slowed down to come into our space-time, they—stretch and flatten—they become a disk. This, don't take this as gospel, this is suspicions I have, it's what's stimulating my research, eh? 'Cause I see that, and I think ... it makes sense! You know, it makes sense!

From the perspective of Spiritualists such as Richard, the 'scientific' knowledge and technology of these alien visitors is obviously vastly superior to our own. Spiritualists who believe in the extraterrestrial hypothesis suggest that only a superior form of science could account for the seemingly impossible feats accomplished by UFOs. Folklorist Thomas Bullard suggests that reports of UFO sightings "have the UFO not merely surpass the limitations of present technology but escape the confines of physics altogether" (Bullard, 1982: 473). Orthodox scientific objections that UFO phenomena are physically impossible (for example, the ability to make right angle turns in mid-air at speeds in excess of 2000 miles per hour) are consequently ignored, since extraterrestrial scientific understanding so obviously exceeds our own.²⁰ Believers in the extraterrestrial hypothesis insist that some form of 'superior' science could account for the seemingly supernatural abilities displayed by UFOs.

This perception of UFOs as the space ships of a technologically and scientifically superior race has led to an interesting development within the Spiritualist context. The presumed scientific and technological superiority of this alien race has led to a corollary perception that it is also a *spiritually* superior one. This clear sense of spiritual superiority is apparent in Lily Dale healer and medium Joel's description of his first contact with extraterrestrial entities. When asked how he knew they were extraterrestrials, he replied:

The awareness, the energy, the quality of the beings were completely different from other beings that I encountered on the spiritual level. Completely different from a departed relative, completely different from a guide, a teacher, a master, or an angel.

In his response, Joel runs through his entire range of spiritual contacts, from the least spiritually advanced entity previously encountered (a departed relative), to the most advanced (an angel). The extraterrestrial entities he encountered far surpassed even the angel in spiritual development.

Extraterrestrial entities are apparently so spiritually superior, in fact, that contact with them is exceedingly difficult for those less spiritually advanced than they. Within the North American Spiritualist belief system, every individual is understood to possess a spiritual 'vibration', and the higher the level of spiritual attainment, the higher the vibrational level of the individual. People of lower vibrational frequencies cannot psychically perceive those of higher vibrational levels, unless the more highly developed individuals attune their vibrational frequencies to match those spiritually beneath them. According to Joel, the vibrational level of extraterrestrials is exceptionally high. In recounting a contact with an extraterrestrial entity which occurred during meditation, he recalled:

Just for a moment, I felt this being, this presence, that was completely, completely different from what I had felt before. And I asked, you know, I thought, 'who are you?' And the answer I got back was that this being, who was of so high a vibration I could only hold the contact for a minute, was from a planet in a galaxy many light years away from earth. And the sense I got was, that this being was going to be my guide, only I wasn't ready yet. So I know that, when I'm ready, this being will be my guide.

Joel is a highly regarded medium and healer who counts an 'angel' among his regular spiritual contacts. The fact that he considers himself to be so spiritually

inferior to this extraterrestrial entity that he could only hold the contact for a 'minute' is a clear indication of the immense aura of superiority that extraterrestrials are perceived to hold. Another experienced Spiritualist healer recounted a similar contact, again stressing the vast spiritual superiority of the alien beings. Michael recalled:

About three years after I learned how to meditate, I was in my room at home alone, in Montreal, and I said, in my mind, 'If there are extraterrestrials I'd like to see you'. And then I had a very strong impression of two beings in the room, the visual effect was almost like, if you ever see 'Star Trek', and the particles [in the transporter beam] haven't quite come together. So it was almost like two images like that. And the feeling that I got from them was, 'We're here, and, when we feel ... that you are ready to work with us, then we'll be here, but until then there is no purpose in this.' And they haven't come back. Quite obviously I'm not ready!

During the fieldwork period, every Spiritualist who told me of experienced contacts with extraterrestrials readily identified their vibrational energy as too 'strange', 'odd' or 'different' to belong to earthly entities. One Spiritualist medium, who believes his daughter to be a reincarnated extraterrestrial, recalled his immediate recognition of her alien vibrational frequency at the moment of her birth. Much to his wife's embarrassment, he exclaimed in the delivery room, "Oh my God! We've got a child who's from outer space!" Hilary Evans (1984: 156–157), a popular occult and UFO author, suggests that extraterrestrial entity contacts are more immediately recognisable as such than any other type of entity contact. Certainly, there is no doubt in the minds of either Joel or Michael that the entities they encountered were extraterrestrial in origin. These entities were clearly different from the spirits of the dead that Spiritualist mediums normally encounter. Their vibrational level was such that earthly beings had difficulty sustaining the spiritual contact. The superiority of extraterrestrials in this context, therefore, is clearly a superiority of both 'spiritual' and 'scientific' development.

Discussion

While the alien quality of extraterrestrial entity contacts might be indisputable for Spiritualists who have experienced them, what is most revealing within the Spiritualist context is that any such alien entity contact should be perceived to occur at all. There is a general consensus among anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists who have studied 'anomalous' contact experiences that the cultural milieu of the percipient shapes the experience and interpretation of 'anomalous' events. As anthropologist Felicitas Goodman notes in reference to spirit possession, "not just any spirit [entity] can be involved in a particular possession [experience]. It has to be the *right* spirit. That is, the respective spirit is 'culture specific'." (Goodman, 1988: 4).

In a study of UFO contactees, psychologists Spanos, Cross, Dickson & DuBreuil (1993) find that UFO contact experiences are equally 'culture specific'. They write:

the finding that most clearly differentiated the UFO groups from the comparison groups was [the pre-existing] belief in UFOs and in the existence of alien life forms ... post hoc comparisons indicated that the two UFO groups failed to differ [from one another] on this index. However, both UFO groups scored higher on this index than either of the comparison groups, which failed to differ from one another. (Spanos *et al.*, 1993: 627, 629)

While it is hardly profound to note that extraterrestrial contactees believe in UFOs more frequently than do non-contactees, the implications of this finding are significant. As Spanos *et al.* go on to note, "these findings suggest that many of the UFO subjects may have been drawn to beliefs about alien life before having UFO experiences" (Spanos *et al.*, 1993: 630). This conclusion further reemphasises the point that anomalous contact experiences are shaped by previous cultural expectation.

Within the Spiritualist context, there is no apparent need for Spiritualists to identify mediumistically contacted entities as 'extraterrestrial'.²¹ The Spiritualist belief in communication with the spirits of the dead provides Spiritualists with an established interpretation of any alternate state of consciousness indigenously interpreted as the result of 'contact' with spiritual beings. Spiritualists believe that the spiritually advanced spirits of the human dead become the spiritual 'guides' or teachers of living Spiritualists. Any 'advanced' entity contact within the Spiritualist context should therefore be understandable and 'explainable' within this traditional interpretational framework. The incorporation of extraterrestrials as spirit guides is significant, therefore, precisely because it reveals an alternative interpretation of experiences readily understandable within traditional Spiritualist terms.

The adoption of extraterrestrials as spirit guides is much more prevalent among New Age channellers than among traditional Spiritualists. Figures such as Phyllis Schlemmer (channel for the extraterrestrial Council of Nine) and Mauritio (channel for the extraterrestrial entities reputedly responsible for the Old Testament prophet Elijah's abduction experience) are outspoken proponents of this form of New Age spirituality.²² Many traditional Spiritualists explicitly link the concept of New Age spirituality with a belief in extraterrestrials, and distinguish such belief sharply from 'true' Spiritualism. Edith, an elderly third generation Spiritualist, for example, told me that the members of one of the Spiritualist Churches at which I worked were not really Spiritualists at all. "They are more interested in New Age, which is not necessarily Spiritualist", she told me, "it encompasses Spiritualism, but it branches out into things ... which is extraterrestrials, you know, but that's not a religion."

Clearly, however, the adoption of extraterrestrials as spirit guides is religious for many contemporary Spiritualists. The inclusion of this New Age element may reflect the perception among Spiritualists that the New Age Movement holds tremendous appeal and acceptance among mainstream North Americans, whereas Spiritualism in the late twentieth century holds a place of relative obscurity.²³ According to J. A. North (1984) and James Grayson (1984, 1992), religious traditions frequently undergo syncretic 'borrowing' in conditions of religious contact in which one tradition clearly exceeds the other in terms of political power, popular prestige, or moral suasion.²⁴ Contemporary 'New Age'

Spiritualists may have incorporated extraterrestrials into their system of belief as one means of adopting the symbolic form of New Age spirituality, and thereby associating their own tradition with one which they perceive to hold more popularity and popular acceptance among the general populace. No matter how popular Spiritualists may perceive the New Age Movement to be, however, this cannot entirely account for the current incorporation of extraterrestrials as spirit guides by some contemporary Spiritualists. Other extremely popular New Age ideas, such as ecological spirituality, have not been adopted.²⁵ In addition, even 'New Age' Spiritualists disassociate themselves from the New Age Movement generally.²⁶ To understand the contemporary incorporation of extraterrestrials into the Spiritualist system, I therefore suggest, one must look beyond the possible attempt to encompass Spiritualism within the perceived aura of popularity that surrounds the New Age Movement. Instead, I suggest that the inclusion of extraterrestrials into the Spiritualist belief system can be traced to the longstanding Spiritualist attempt to encompass Spiritualism within an aura of *scientific* legitimacy for Spiritualist belief.

The single greatest difference between spirit entities and extraterrestrial ones is that extraterrestrials are believed to be representatives of a scientifically and technologically advanced species. Unlike the existence of spirits, the existence of UFOs and extraterrestrials is at least potentially acceptable within orthodox science. As T. Bullard suggests: "Science made technological UFOs possible, and scientific interest in extraterrestrial life breathed plausibility into them" (Bullard, 1982: 474). As a consequence, in some Spiritualist perceptions, communication with extraterrestrial entities is compatible with a scientifically acceptable worldview in a way that pure spirit communication is apparently not. In contrast to the existence of spirits, the existence of extraterrestrials at least remains a point of scientific debate. Whereas the dominant orthodox scientific hypothesis suggests that the existence of extraterrestrial life is likely, but that interplanetary visitations from such life forms are highly unlikely, popular perception fails to distinguish between the likelihood of their existence, and the likelihood of their presence here on earth.²⁷ For some Spiritualists, the fact that extraterrestrial life is a scientific possibility can be enough to 'prove' the scientific legitimacy of the extraterrestrial hypothesis. The incorporation of extraterrestrials as spirit guides, therefore, provides at least marginal 'scientific' proof for Spiritualist belief.

In combining superior spirituality with scientific superiority in the figures of extraterrestrials, and in stressing the scientific legitimacy of belief in extraterrestrial existence, Spiritualists reveal the 'rationalised' emphasis of contemporary 'UFO religion'. As C. G. Jung (1959) notes with reference to UFOs, extraterrestrials in this context can assume the status of 'technological angels'. Jung suggests that the entire extraterrestrial hypothesis of UFO origin stems from a concern with the challenges modern scientific theory and technology present to everyday life. Such a belief could not have arisen in a non-technological period of history, he suggests (Jung, 1959: 3–5), because technological intervention was not considered necessary to explain anomalous events in times when the direct intervention of heaven in human affairs was considered a rational possibility.²⁸ In the idealisation of extraterrestrials and UFOs, science and technology replace the supernatural and the miraculous as sources for potential salvation.

J-B. Renard (1990: 82) suggests that belief in extraterrestrial contact reveals a sacralisation of science unparalleled elsewhere, for contactee reports express

communication with divine-like beings in scientific and technological terms. Within the Spiritualist context, extraterrestrials clearly reveal a 'divine-like' character in their superior scientific, technological and spiritual abilities. Theologian and religious studies scholar Ted Peters (1977) has identified four characteristics which he calls 'the criteria for divinity': transcendence, omniscience, perfection and the offer of redemption. According to Peters (1977: 119–166), believers in UFOs conceptualise extraterrestrials in these terms. He writes:

the religious interpretation of the alleged UFO occupants as celestial saviours [often] goes unrecognized for what it is, namely, a naturalized or scientized theology of salvation. The religious dimension is almost hidden ... the religious dimensions [of UFO contact experiences] were sublimated, i.e., unconsciously redirected away from a superstitious belief in a God who saves and toward a much more acceptable belief in a natural universe where technology saves. Are we not all tempted at least a little to believe [in] and hope [for such salvation]? (Peters, 1977: 20)

In moving potential sources of spiritual wisdom away from a spiritistic realm and towards an empirical one, the 'rationalisation' of Spiritualist religious belief through the adoption of extraterrestrials as spirit guides is, therefore, clearly apparent.

The Spiritualist incorporation of extraterrestrials as spirit guides also reveals, I suggest, more than a simple rationalisation of Spiritualist belief, however. The adoption of extraterrestrials into the Spiritualist belief system also points to a critique of the 'disenchanted' rationalised world of orthodox science. As mentioned, the one significant difference between the figures of extraterrestrials as spirit guides and more traditionally accepted spirit entities is that these extraterrestrial guides are representatives of a living, scientifically advanced species. It is precisely this scientific and technological superiority which establishes their spiritual superiority in Spiritualist perception. Just as our modern human science cannot account for the presence or anomalous motion of UFOs, neither can our spiritual knowledge encompass their alien wisdom. Extraterrestrials exceed our spiritual development just as they exceed our technological development. The question that consequently arises, however, is precisely what Spiritualists mean when they claim that extraterrestrials are spiritually, scientifically and technologically 'superior'?

According to philosopher of science Nicholas Rescher (1985), the very concept of a 'superior' extraterrestrial science is meaningless, for in order to be superior to terrestrial science, this alien science would have to be the *same* as ours, only *better*. If extraterrestrial science *differed* from earthly science in ways, means, or goals, it could not be said to be either superior or inferior, only different. Like comparing apples to oranges or opera to rock music, in such a case one could merely judge each endeavour on its own merits, rather than hierarchically valuing one over another. While there might be a certain 'charm' to the idea of a superior extraterrestrial science, therefore, according to Rescher (1985: 112), "the idea is ... also, alas, very unrealistic".

For those Spiritualists who accept the extraterrestrial hypothesis it is precisely the *difference* between terrestrial and extraterrestrial science which makes the science of extraterrestrials *superior* to our own. The very reason extraterrestrials

are capable of doing things with their science and technology that we cannot do, not even comprehend, is that extraterrestrial science has merged both empirical and spiritual truths. Extraterrestrials neither uphold nor apparently perceive the dichotomy between these two realms that is so integral to contemporary terrestrial science. This fusion of realms can be seen, according to Hamilton medium Richard, in the faster-than-light technology that UFOs display. According to Richard, any successful attempt to exceed the speed of light must be based both on 'scientific' and 'spiritual' knowledge. He told me:

I think the time break, the fact that life as we know it does not exist past the speed of light according to Einstein's theory, right? Well, it's true, material life does not exist past that point ... to break that barrier, we've got to jump out of the material plane. WITH our material ... [To do that,] we need to tap Spirit, the living energy ...

Extraterrestrials, in surpassing the 'time break' above which 'material life' as we know it does not exist, consequently reveal a consolidation of 'spiritual' and 'scientific' knowledge towards which Spiritualists themselves have been working since the nineteenth century. Contemporary orthodox terrestrial science is flawed, therefore, because it cannot comprehend the 'truth' of a spiritual realm. In their idealisation of extraterrestrials, I therefore suggest, Spiritualists implicitly criticise the narrow limits of orthodox science. As entities who have mastered both scientific knowledge and spiritual wisdom, and who have fused the two in such a way that scientific and technological marvels result, extraterrestrials have understandably become for some Spiritualists ideal choices for spirit guides.

Conclusions

Spiritualists have been criticised for their 'reduction' of the supernatural to the mundane realm of everyday 'science' throughout the nearly 150 years of their religious history. The adoption of extraterrestrials as spirit guides could be seen as yet one more instance in which the 'miraculous' is 'rationalised' or reduced to the level of empirical 'science'.²⁹ Contemporary Spiritualists certainly do maintain their insistence that Spiritualist beliefs are compatible with 'science'. The readily apparent idealisation of science within contemporary Spiritualism does not go untempered by criticism, however. The Spiritualists with whom I worked are consistently critical of the refusal of orthodox scientists to expand the boundaries of 'science' to admit the 'reality' of a spiritual realm. Contemporary Spiritualists like Richard are concerned with what they perceive to be the failure of scientists to recognize the possible relevance of spiritual 'truth' to the scientific endeavour. Spiritualists themselves have always been determined to unite 'science' with religious 'truth'. In the figures of extraterrestrials, some Spiritualists have adopted spirit guides which represent much more than the simple 'rationalisation' of Spiritualist faith, therefore. Extraterrestrials exemplify the possibility of a successful union between spirituality and science, for not only are extraterrestrials both spiritually and scientifically advanced, but contemporary orthodox science does allow for their existence. Given both the idealisation and the Spiritualist criticism of 'science', and given the perceived technological and spiritual superiority of extraterrestrials, the inclusion of ex-

traterrestrials and UFOs can be seen as a coherent and consistent development towards a 'New Age' for Spiritualism. The incorporation of extraterrestrials as spirit guides can indeed be perceived, as one Spiritualist informed me, as "the next phase... of [Spiritualist] evolution".

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NOTES

1. In this manner, the 'rapper' claimed to be the spirit of a murdered peddler buried in the basement. Attempts by the Fox family and their contemporaries to verify this claim failed, when the excavators reached water before finding a body, but Cadwallader (1917) and Doyle (1926) report that a body was recovered from the site in 1904. The Spiritualists of the early twentieth century considered this discovery to be the 'missing link', in a concept borrowed by Leah Underhill (1885) from evolutionary theory, in the chain of evidence in support of Spiritualist claims. See Britten (1884), Cadwallader (1917), Doyle (1921, 1926), Hill (1918), and Underhill (1885) for a full description of the events surrounding the 'Hydesville Rappings'.
2. For a discussion of early investigations into Spiritualist phenomena, see Braude (1985, 1989), Brandon (1983), Garrouette (1993), Isaacs (1983), Moore (1977) and Nelson (1969).
3. For discussions of orthodox scientific perceptions of Spiritualist claims to scientific legitimacy, see in particular Bednarowski (1973), Garrouette (1993) and Moore (1977).
4. There are strong parallels between nineteenth century attempts to scientifically 'prove' the existence of spirits and twentieth century attempts to 'prove' the existence of UFOs. For a discussion of these parallels, see Jacobs (1983).
5. 'Core' beliefs are articulated in a number of ways. Two of the Churches I worked with listed them as follows. The other two Churches listed them in slightly altered, but similar, forms: (1) the Fatherhood of God; (2) the Brotherhood of Man; (3) the immortality of the soul and its personal characteristics; (4) communion between departed human spirits and mortals; (5) personal responsibility; (6) compensation and retribution for all good and evil deeds done on earth; (7) a path of eternal progress, open to every soul.
6. The inclusion of extraterrestrials into the belief system of some Spiritualists was surprising for two reasons. First, as argued later in this paper, there is no apparent need for Spiritualists to identify mediumistically contacted entities as 'extraterrestrial' given the spiritistic emphasis of mainstream Spiritualist faith. Secondly, most of the Spiritualists with whom I worked were explicitly scornful of the New Age practice of 'channelling' (including Spiritualists influenced by New Age thought)—and it is through channelling that most of the contact with extraterrestrials is believed by New Agers to take place. Contemporary Spiritualists are critical of channelling for two reasons: the ease with which such deep-trance possession can be faked, and the questionable morality of any spirit who would take full possession of another person's body (the Spiritualists with whom I worked did not practice full possession trance for this reason). Consequently, despite the increasing prevalence of extraterrestrial spirits being channelled by New Agers, I had not expected to find that some Spiritualists had also adopted extraterrestrials as spirit guides.
7. Ellwood writes: "Spiritualism and the UFO groups fundamentally reflect a new and direct discovery of symbols of mediation in the fabric of American life. The wise ones come as American Indians, Spirit Doctors, departed relatives, or from a futuristic technology. Both types of groups employ the same manner of communication: vision and marvellous journeys, trance speaking and writing, seance circles, and telepathy. The close interaction between Spiritualism and UFO cults is not surprising, for one finds there is much exchange of persons between them" (Ellwood, 1973: 131).
8. This 'rationalised' emphasis can be seen, for example, in the "channelled" writings of the extraterrestrial 'council of nine', who 'speak' through New Age channeller Phyllis Schlemmer,

- and who frequently use the language and concepts of physics and evolutionary biology to express their moral and religious message (Schlemmer & Jenkins, 1993).
9. See, for example, Bouchard (1992), Bullard (1982), Ellwood (1973, 1992), Jacobs (1983), and Renard (1990, 1991).
 10. The history of UFO sightings can actually be traced back much earlier than 1947. For example, Jacobs (1975) begins his account of the UFO controversy with a discussion of sightings made in 1896–1897.
 11. Bullard (1982: 458) reports that there have been an estimated 60,000 cases of UFO sightings since 1947.
 12. J-B. Renard (1990: 93–94) suggests that belief in the extraterrestrial hypothesis of UFO origin is found across all economic, social, and educational boundaries. Belief in the extraterrestrial hypothesis is therefore not confined to the Spiritualist context. For further estimates of the number of UFO sightings outside the Spiritualist context, see Hynek & Vallée (1975: 23–25) and Jacobs (1983: 218). For attempts to ‘explain’ UFO and extraterrestrial sightings within a psychophysiological framework, see Dittburner & Persinger (1993), Persinger (1992) and Spanos *et al.* (1993).
 13. The parallels between these investigations and the early investigations into Spiritualist mediumship are striking. As in the nineteenth century investigations into mediumistic phenomena, the construction of what constitutes ‘legitimate’ orthodox science shapes the verdict of any ‘reputable’ investigation into UFOs. Scientists, such as James McDonald (1969) who have investigated the phenomena and have accepted the extraterrestrial hypothesis are labelled as ‘deviant’ or ‘gullible’ by their fellow orthodox scientists. See Hynek (1972) for an orthodox critique of McDonald’s conclusions. See Jacobs (1975, 1983) for an historical account of investigations into UFOs. See Garrouette (1993) for a discussion of ‘labelling’ as applied to 19th century scientists who adopted the spirit hypothesis.
 14. A fourth possibility, that UFOs represented ‘secret’ terrestrial technology, was rejected in 1949 by the US Air Force, and was not seriously considered after that point, owing to the apparent technological impossibility of certain commonly reported UFO manoeuvres (for example, rapid acceleration from hovering to speeds in excess of 2000 miles per hour, right angle turns in mid-air, etc.) For a discussion of the US Air Force investigations into UFOs as a potential Soviet threat, see Jacobs (1975: 35–62).
 15. For example, astronomers Donald H. Menzel & Lyle Boyd (1963) argue vehemently that UFO sightings are either misidentified natural phenomena or, in rare cases, psychological in origin. Astronomer J. Allen Hynek (1972), on the other hand, argues that UFOs represent, in some cases, genuine unidentified phenomena in need of further scientific inquiry. Physicist James McDonald (1969) argues vehemently in favour of the extraterrestrial hypothesis.
 16. Orthodox scientific investigation into this issue dropped off sharply at this point. Researchers who did continue to investigate the issue stress the overwhelming lack of verifiability for the extraterrestrial hypothesis. The quality of anecdotal evidence in its favour is poor, there is a complete absence of physical evidence in its support (no UFO has yet been discovered on earth, despite numerous claims to the contrary in the popular media), and the seeming impossibility of overcoming the incomprehensible distances between solar systems have made the hypothesis almost untenable (Jacobs 1975, 1983). For a discussion of grounds on which the Condon Committee reached its conclusions, see Condon (1969).
 17. See, for example, the proceedings of the American Association for the Advancement of Science symposium on Unidentified Flying Objects in December of 1969 (Sagan & Page, 1972).
 18. Belief that UFOs are extraterrestrial spacecraft and that this explanation is the most ‘likely’ one is expressed in the following conversation held in Lily Dale in the spring of 1991. In this brief exchange, the belief that UFOs are extraterrestrial in origin, and that the American government ‘knows’ this to be true, is expressed. The popular television shows about UFOs ‘prove’ that the extraterrestrial hypothesis is correct: Cheryl: “Have you been seeing all the shows [about UFOs] on TV lately? It’s like it’s, stepped up.” Elizabeth: “What’s happening is, the government is encouraging private people to do this, because they want the American public to realize, that this is now so, in a gentle gradual way, because there’s going to a big surprise one day pretty soon!” Cheryl: “They want people prepared for it. They’re preparing people.”
 19. While the technological emphasis remains strong within UFO religion despite a decline in orthodox scientific interest in investigating the extraterrestrial hypothesis, there has also arisen an “ultra-terrestrial” emphasis which stresses the psychic qualities of UFO contacts rather than

- the physical ones. This shift in emphasis was sparked initially by burgeoning accounts of 'alien abductions', beginning with, but not limited to that of George Adamski. For a discussion of the shift within the UFO movement away from a technological emphasis and towards a quasi-mystical one, see Jacobs (1983).
20. For example, Donald Menzel, astronomer and prominent UFO 'debunker', writes: "Hynek has further admonished us to remember that there will be a science of the twenty-first, and of the thirtieth, centuries. Presumably they [sic] thus seek to refute the old-fashioned scientists who, like myself, continue to believe in the second law of thermodynamics, the impossibility of perpetual motion, the laws of conservation of matter and energy, and the laws of action and reaction" (Menzel, 1972: 126).
 21. Interpretation of entity contacts as 'extraterrestrial' in origin are not entirely confined to the contemporary twentieth century context. There is one documented case of a nineteenth century Spiritualist woman who communicated with an extraterrestrial entity while in mediumistic trance. Flournoy (1963) provides a detailed psychological analysis of the 'martian cycle' of mediumistic visions of 'Mlle H el ene Smith'. Smith reportedly communicated with 'the great man Astan e', who lived on Mars, through the services of another spirit named 'Esenale', who had lived on both Earth and Mars in previous incarnations, and could therefore act as interpreter. There is some evidence that Astan e's superior spiritual nature is linked to his mastery of superior technology. Flournoy writes that on September 5, 1896, H el ene "saw before her a landscape and some peculiar people ... On the bridge there was a man of dark complexion (Astan e), carrying in his hands an instrument somewhat resembling a carriage-lantern in appearance, which, being pressed, emitted flames, and which seemed to be a flying-machine ... He rises superior to the crowd, inasmuch as he alone possesses a flying-machine incomprehensible to us" (Flournoy, 1963: 162, 178).
 22. See Schlemmer & Jenkins (1993) and MacLean (1986) for New Age accounts of these channelled entities.
 23. According to Mead (1985), there are approximately 180,000 practising Spiritualists in the United States, with an additional fifteen interested non-members for each registered member. However, at the height of the Spiritualist movement in the latter half of the nineteenth century, there were over one million members, with one Christian estimate placing their numbers at over twelve million out of a base population of twenty-five million people (Nelson, 1969).
 24. Grayson (1992: 203), for example, notes that when a world religion and an indigenous tradition come into contact, two types of syncretism may result: he calls these "High" and "Low" syncretism. Grayson goes on to note, however, that syncretism as properly understood within the History of Religions, really only applies to the contact between foreign, missionising world religions and local indigenous traditions, where power imbalances of one kind or another are extreme. Consequently, it is questionable whether syncretism theory proper can be applied to the Spiritualist/New Age context, since both traditions are native to North America, and neither can be considered a missionising world religion.
 25. Many of the contemporary Spiritualists with whom I worked were aware of environmentalist concerns, and explicitly linked them to the New Age Movement. The few personal attempts on behalf of guest speakers to Lily Dale to incorporate nature spirituality into the Spiritualist system, however, were met with disinterest and lack of success. This is at least partly due, I suggest, to the other-worldly focus of Spiritualist spirituality, and its relative incompatibility with a this-worldly concern for ecological Spirituality. It also illustrates, however, that the simple prestige of New Age ideas is insufficient to account for their adoption or lack thereof into the Spiritualist system.
 26. Many Spiritualists in fact see the New Age Movement as a source for potential converts to Spiritualism, rather than seeing themselves as potential converts to New Age spirituality. Edith, for example, told me that the New Agers' interest in taking "classes in nutrition, classes in ... herbal remedies, classes in making life less stressful, studying religion and seeing if they can duplicate what mediums do, or speakers do, or things like that" sometimes leads New Agers ("especially those in the middle, in their late 30's and 40's"), to Spiritualism, for "our religion appeals to them, because one of our principles, that we believe, is that you are responsible for your own life [and this appeals to them]."
 27. Carl Sagan (1972: 265-275) is a representative of this first 'scientific' position. According to J-B. Renard (1990: 82-92), a 'scale' of believers in the extraterrestrial hypothesis can be identified,

- from most sceptical to least: (1) scientists; (2) the 'cultured' public; (3) UFO researchers; (4) the 'general' public; and (5) flying-saucer contactees.
28. Today, however, it is common to 'backdate' the extraterrestrial hypothesis in the historical record as a means of explaining anomalous historical accounts, for example, the Biblical narratives of Ezekial, Elijah and Elisha (Ezekial 1: 4-13; II Kings 2: 11).
 29. Spiritualists are not alone in this. As Eileen Barker (1985) notes, both members of marginal religious groups and members of wider mainstream society tend to grant 'science' tremendous prestige and authority. She suggests, in fact, that within 'Western society' generally, there is "a healthy (some might say unhealthy) respect for science. This is because science is generally acknowledged to be the source of enormous power: science 'works' [and] science 'knows'" (Barker, 1985: 198).

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