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### The family, Ufos and god: A modern extension of Christian Mythology

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## The Family, UFOs and God: A Modern Extension of Christian Mythology

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MIKAEL ROTHSTEIN

**ABSTRACT** *The Family is one of the best known new religions, and perhaps one of the most studied. However, one specific aspect of The Family's belief system has never been discussed by scholars: UFOs. The article describes the versatile notion of UFOs in The Family and is based on normative texts, as well as on quotations from believers. It attempts to explain why this aspect was originally introduced into David Berg's interpretation of Protestant Christianity and how it is understood today. The article touches upon phenomenological as well as sociological themes.*

### Introduction

The emergence and development of UFO-religions, including Christian evaluations of the alleged UFO-phenomenon, has led to a considerable scholarly interest. Recently, this interest has been reflected in the anthology *The Gods Have Landed* (Lewis, 1995) which covers a wide range of subjects reaching from the religious dimensions of popular ufology to case studies of explicitly religious UFO-groups. The book, however, does not mention the UFO-dimension of The Family's theology, nor does, as far as I know, any other book on UFO-religion. Furthermore, one looks in vain for comments on these concepts in one of the most comprehensive accounts of The Family, the book *Sex, Slander and Salvation* (Lewis & Melton, 1994). UFOs, however, do play a role in The Family's belief system and thus in contemporary Christian mythology. This article intends to explore this specific aspect of The Family's theology with an emphasis on sources collected from the group's international centre in Switzerland and from local informants in Denmark.<sup>1</sup> The issue, of course, has a much wider bearing on ufology, but I shall restrict my discussion to The Family.

### UFOs: Angels, Angelic Vehicles or Means for Transporting the Dead?<sup>2</sup>

In at least two so-called MO-letters, which are internally circulated theological leaflets, the founder and spiritual leader of The Family, David Berg, comments on UFOs or 'flying saucers'. His conceptualisation of the subject, however, is far from unambiguous. In one place he asserts that he believes in UFOs and that they are visitors of superior intelligence from outer space. He identifies the occupants of flying saucers as angels and explains the saucers to be "circles of power or energy and light because they are light!"<sup>3</sup> It is not totally clear whether Berg believes UFOs to be angelic beings themselves or rather vehicles used by angels. Elsewhere he writes: There are UFO's! They are spirit beings", but he also says: "That's the way certain angels travel".<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Berg says that UFOs

"do appear and people have seen them. Technicians have scientifically tracked them". Referring to Dan 6,27, Lk. 21,11 and 25, Acts 22,6 and Rev. 15,1 he also interprets the UFOs as Biblical "signs in the sky" to unbelieving man.<sup>5</sup> Finally, adding to the confusion, a MO-letter in Danish, distributed in Denmark in 1977, states that Jesus is "the best trip", and Berg urges the reader to "become a *new UFO* this night!—And get yourself a *flying saucer now!*—*The Holy Ghost!* It will take you wherever you may wish!" The text ends: "Come on UFOs, let's go!"<sup>6</sup>

Apart from what can be seen in these normative texts of the group, two of my informants from The Family said that UFOs are "probably some kind of machines". One man, however, said that UFOs are "celestial beings themselves".<sup>7</sup> Referring to the absurd speed and movements of the saucers frequently reported, Berg himself says: "Their speed and manoeuvre-ability are so great that only a spirit could survive such courses".<sup>8</sup>

On the one hand, according to Berg, UFOs are made of solid materials. On the other they are energy or light phenomena closely associated to angels, spirits or the Holy Ghost, or they are simply understood to *be* angels.

This confusing state of affairs may explain why members of The Family deliberately disregarded my questions concerning UFOs as being of "very little interest". The UFO-related theology of The Family is not easy to grasp and one may suspect the disciples of David Berg, consciously or not, to avoid conflicting aspects of his teachings. It is correct, one Danish spokesman for the group said, that "Father David has discussed the subject, but no member of The Family is really interested".<sup>9</sup> In my own judgement this is true, and perhaps there are not only theological or philosophical reasons to this attitude among the believers. Good sociological or even political reasons for the lack of ufological interest were also apparent at the time of my fieldwork: the controversial subject of UFOs certainly did not fit into The Family's endeavours to align themselves with mainstream Christians in Denmark at the time of my interrogations. Furthermore, conflicts relating to The Family were daily news during my investigation, as counter-cultists tried to humiliate and undermine the believers' faith by going into controversial details of The Family's theology. The reticent attitude towards the ufological dimension of the belief system may well be caused by this state of affairs.<sup>10</sup> It is only normal that some aspects of religious systems are favoured at the expense of others, but in this case, I believe, we are able to suggest why this particular dimension (the UFO-theme) has become more or less ignored in The Family's rhetoric.

This, however, does not mean that The Family's UFO-beliefs are of no significance. On the contrary, they are in tune with a much broader understanding of the concept, namely that of the eschatological or millenarian New Age belief in UFOs as agents of the coming Golden Age and a similar eschatological understanding of UFOs within certain sections of Christianity. Considering the fact that The Family is a modern apocalyptic religion, it is not surprising that Berg's theology is influenced by other millenarian or eschatological belief systems, and it would be wrong to leave the issue simply aside, because it has a low status in The Family's statements to outsiders. As it appears there is more to The Family's UFO-related theology.

Having made further inquiries into the matter, apart from what is referred to above, I received additional materials from The Family's headquarters in Switzerland, shortly after the death of David Berg in November 1994. This

information does not contradict what has already been said, although the emphasis is placed elsewhere. The text I received is, so I am informed, an account by David Berg as though received from a "Heavenly Visitor" explaining the modes of travel in Heaven.<sup>11</sup> In short, he describes the UFOs as "heavenly means of transportation" or "celestial vehicles" with one primary task, namely to take deceased humans to heaven. This is not at all the case in earlier statements on the subject. Here, of course, the exact notions of life and death, and body and soul are of importance. The UFOs are described as material objects, and one gets the impression that they are supposed to carry material objects as well. However, in paragraph 34 of the text, it is said that those fortunate enough to be taken away by a UFO "have given up their flesh bodies". Now they are "truly happy, clothed in their new white and colorful robes of light, designed for Heavenly places!" We definitely get the impression of human spirits or souls on board a physical flying machine piloted by angels on its way to heaven. Only rarely, so it is said, will the Lord need larger forms for mass transportation, because the "really saved people" are few. However, even if thousands of individuals die in "wars, eruptions or explosions", relatively small UFOs will usually be capable of managing the transportation of those bound for heaven, we are told.

Although I have failed to establish any connection between The Family (David Berg) and a minor contactee, Wayne Sulo Aho, it is interesting to observe that Aho held similar positions as to the question of who is piloting the flying saucers. In 1948, according to ufologist Jerome Clark, when Aho was wondering who was aboard the UFOs, in an instant he heard these words: "We are the caretakers of the souls of the dead" (Clark, 1992a: 16). I have failed to find other such UFO-interpretations, although a number of somewhat parallel interpretations have been suggested: UFOs and those piloting them may not be seen as actual caretakers of the dead, but it is quite normal that people relate UFOs and UFO occupants to angels, which, in turn, are linked with the dead in popular Christian mythology. Many people, for instance, seem to believe that they will turn into angels when they die.

Furthermore, the very notion of celestial transportation of the dead is by no means unknown in a Euro-American context. A religious theme quite similar to the idea of UFOs as "caretakers of the souls of the dead" is known in the Germanic pre-Christian mythology: the Valkyries (literally 'the choosers of the slain'), a group of female spirits, led the slain warriors to Odin's hall, Valhalla. The Valkyries were known to roam across the sky on wild horses (which is why they had names, such as *Wolkenthrut*, i.e. 'Power of Clouds'), and some sources indicate that they were dressed in shining armour (Branston, 1980: 186ff). Although no direct connections seem reasonable between The Family's concept of flying saucers and that of the pre-Christian Valkyries, a similarity of functions is quite apparent: in both cases the deceased person's soul is taken to a heavenly location where the supreme god awaits it. Also, in both cases the dead belong to the chosen few and the means for transportation is described as airborne, moving strangely and shining brightly.

All we need to consider here is the fact that the notion of extraordinary transportation of the departed to a celestial abode is old and well-known, and that the influence upon The Family's theology in this respect may, therefore, be more complicated than one might imagine.<sup>12</sup>

A secondary function of the celestial vehicles, according to The Family's teachings, is to appear as "warnings and signs in the sky" in order to encourage those of faith and to awaken the non-believers. To see the UFOs should, according to The Family's texts, provoke reactions such as: "Our mighty Angels and Archangels and powers of the Heavens are present and very attentive and very observant of what's going on!" However, according to The Family, people must be ready to receive these celestial beings, otherwise they cannot fulfil their obligation as agitators for the Lord.<sup>13</sup> Here, The Family's theology comes close to other religious UFO-doctrines, insisting that prior to any actual contact, people on Earth have to accept and understand the very existence of our 'Brothers from Space'.

Above all, it is evident that The Family's concept of UFOs is ambiguous. It appears in many different interpretations in the authoritative text and, thus, there is no common understanding of the theme among the believers.

### The City of God and Ufological Exegesis

Apart from these interpretations of UFOs, The Family strongly promotes the notion of "God's Space City", "God's Space Vehicle", or simply "The Original Flying Saucer". Such designations refer to The City of God mentioned in Revelation, chapters 21 and 22. To The Family, 'God's Great Heavenly Space City' will descend from above, once the Earth has been recreated as a new 'Garden of Eden':

The greatest space vehicle ever created, the most wonderful Spaceship ever conceived, built by the Lord and on its way down to Earth now!<sup>14</sup>

What interests us is the fact that The Family has depicted the Biblical text, which is quite unintelligible, in a way that makes it concrete and which aligns it to contemporary UFO lore:

Space Ship—Coming Soon! [...] The most spectacular spaceship is now sailing through the Universe on its way to our planet! [...] It glows with a brilliant light [...] This gigantic spaceship is floating, sailing through space in beautiful serenity and silence.<sup>15</sup>

Those who will live in God's City will, according to The Family's materials, be able to fly through the air with no aid, but they "may prefer" to go by saucers "which offer comfortable and scenic group tours of the outside world".<sup>16</sup> The vision, of course, is millennial and the design is futuristic, both in language and picture. The theological elaboration of the Biblical promises includes, in this case, expectations of superior technology in the shape of flying saucers, and in general, 'God's City' is described as the ultimate material construction.

Here, we may note that The Family's UFOs, contrary to what we find in most Christian interpretations, are granted a favourable position in a Christian setting. UFOs are not messengers from Hell and thus restricted to the negative mythological realm, as they are to most evangelical and fundamentalist writers, nor do they simply trigger theological discussions on the possibility of life elsewhere in the universe or on Christ's relationship to possible extraterrestrials, as outlined by Ted Peters (Peters, 1995). The Family makes positive use of the UFO-myth by placing it within a Christian framework. Thus, The Family's use of UFO-themes signifies a syncretistic mythological structure where all the basic notions of

Christianity are upheld, while partly presented through ufological interpretation.

In other words, UFOs do not actually introduce new ideas into The Family's Christian belief system. Rather, the concept of UFOs provides new mythological articulations of the well-known beliefs. The Christian mythological structure remains the same, while the actors on the mythological stage have altered their appearances. Seen from a theoretical point of view, we are facing a syncretistic mix which is only possible due to corresponding structures in the involved systems, i.e. Christian mythology and UFO mythology. If no such corresponding structural patterns exist, no merging of systems will appear (Rothstein, 1996).

### **Theological Timing: Enter the UFO**

The death of Moses David was not a shock to the members of The Family. They knew he was ill, and he himself had said that he would perhaps die before the reappearance of Christ. Among my Danish informants in The Family, the death of their spiritual leader was interpreted as a sign of Christ's impending return. Considering the eschatological beliefs in the group, this may imply that the expectations of angelic intervention was simultaneously strengthened. Indeed, some of my informants told me that the approaching apocalypse could very well lead to their death, but that dying was merely a step into a much higher level of being. It appears that The Family finds several signs that point in the same direction: the death of Berg, the approaching of the year 2000, the ongoing hostility towards the group by the public, wars in many places in the world, and—in this connection of special interest—an undiminished number of UFO observations. All these are seen as theologically convincing signs of the approaching apocalypse.<sup>17</sup>

One possibility is that the controversial issue of UFOs has been played down by The Family until now, when the historical and social circumstances make the UFOs theologically relevant to the believers. The descriptions from the posters previously mentioned do not develop the idea of UFOs in the same way as the latest material obtained from The Family. Only now, when the great battle between good and evil, God and Satan, is expected to be imminent, the real function of the UFOs is emphasised by the leaders of the group.

The idea that UFOs serve as a means for transportation of "the saved" to their heavenly abode, was apparently introduced by David Berg years ago (my source suggests November 1985 by indicating "11/85"), but it was not—as far as I have been informed—released until December 1994, when this material was sent to me, although my request for UFO materials had been made more than a year before. The partly esoteric nature of The Family's beliefs explains why not all relevant materials were put at my immediate disposal. The fact that the most substantial part was sent to me immediately after the death of David Berg may indicate that a new theological development has taken place and that The Family now wishes the UFO dimension of its teaching to be better known and more closely considered. The reason for this may not be the concept the UFOs itself, but the fact that UFOs are intimately linked with the overall important theological theme in The Family, the Armageddon. On the other hand, all this may be pure coincidence.

Considering that my informants were mostly sought out among The Family's Danish members, it may be of relevance to observe that during the period of my inquiries Denmark had more UFO-sightings than ever before. The Danish UFO-group SUFOI (Skandinavisk UFO Information, i.e. 'Scandinavian UFO Information'), for example, received twice as many UFO-reports during 1995 compared with the year before;<sup>18</sup> more importantly, media coverage, which included several TV-shows featuring UFO-stories, was stronger than ever before. As a consequence of the introduction of cable-TV and satellite-broadcasting, an increasing number of people in Denmark are able to watch international programmes, including entertaining shows on the paranormal. These new and powerful ways of introducing the UFO myth must be taken into consideration, if we want to understand what lies behind the sudden growth in UFO-reports. As many as 33% of the Danish population believe UFOs to exist, while 12% do not know and 55% are definitely rejecting this possibility.<sup>19</sup> Being a Christian sect on the fringe of society, members of The Family show different patterns of behaviour and, consequently, their use of the various news media is not typical. During my talks with members of The Family in Denmark (and to some extent in England) however, it became obvious that they knew about the UFO-debate, and they were well aware that many different approaches to the subject were possible. With regard to UFOs, the members of The Family did not, in my judgement, seem less informed than people in general, while other topics of public debate clearly did not exist for them, which is not in the least surprising. I take this to show that the issue of UFOs had become relevant to The Family's leading theologians during the time of my research.

### The UFO as a Dualistic Symbol

The Family's idea of the 'flying saucer' as benevolent is, however, not unambiguous. In cartoon presentations of The Family's eschatological visions saucer-like crafts serve as destructive combat machines in the devastating army of the Antichrist. One of the cartoons issued by The Family in 1992 depicts two such machines marked with clear '666'-signs in a terrible raid against the people of the Earth.<sup>20</sup>

These machines are not quite, but almost, shaped like a saucer. What strikes the reader is their resemblance to the Martian crafts from the famous classical screen version of H. G. Well's *War of the Worlds*. In this picture, sinister aliens invade the planet Earth and no human device is capable of stopping the aggressors who brutally destroy everything and everybody with powerful rays of an unintelligible nature. Finally, when everything seems hopeless, people gather in churches praying for God to save them. God, however, never enters the scene. The demise of the uninvited strangers is caused by earthly bacteria. In the film the scene is set in a Euro-American environment, and so is the apocalyptic vision of The Family. Just like the saucers in the film, the crafts of the Antichrist in The Family's cartoons kill people with strange rays and, just as in the film, the saucers look for their victims from a low altitude. Finally, people in The Family's exposition, just like those in the film, turn to God for help and comfort. The text that goes with the picture of the hunting flying saucers says that no matter how cruel the Antichrist's war may be, those who still believe in Jesus and the Bible will be saved.

Future developments in The Family's UFO-visions may emerge in the wake of a new major motion picture with almost the same theme: *Independence Day* was released in the United States in early 1996 and reached the European audience in the autumn that year. At this stage it is too early to speculate, but The Family's UFO-related apocalyptic vision may well become further elaborated on the basis of inspiration gained from this magnificent, albeit fictitious film.

However, the difference between *War of Worlds* and The Family's cartoon is also important: when positively understood, the UFOs or flying saucers, are instruments in the hands of divine or celestial beings, if not straightforward manifestations of such entities, but when the UFOs appear as demonic devices, their origin is earthly, if not 'mundane'. It is celestial bodies that take the dead to heaven, but it is earth-made machines that fight the battle of the Antichrist. Hence, the image of the flying saucer is found at both extreme ends of The Family's dualistic belief system. The saucer shape is not restricted to one realm. Rather, it seems to be introduced on various occasions in order to emphasize the importance of what is going on; it even serves to place the religious visions in a futuristic setting which corresponds to The Family's focus on what is approaching, rather than what is now. In this way the UFOs become significant symbols in The Family's dualistic mythology.

None of my informants have—quite understandably—been able to comment on the group's specific use of the iconographic presentation of the UFO or 'flying saucer'. It is difficult to know what may lie behind an artist's expression and I have not been able to see whether the artist is guided by someone with religious authority or to what extent the artist himself is responsible for the depiction. What I have learned is that among ordinary believers, the image of the UFOs or 'flying saucers', whether in the service of God and his angels or in the service of the Antichrist, is still a poorly developed mythological image. As we have seen, even from a strict theological point of view, it is not very well elaborated. The ufological dimension of The Family's belief system is, therefore, an example of mythological themes which do exist, but which are traditionally not considered important. This is, as already mentioned, a typical religious phenomenon. However, the emphasis is usually a different one: in many contemporary Protestant churches concepts, such as Satan, Hell, Evil, the last Days and eternal damnation are removed from daily religious awareness. This certainly is not the case in The Family. In this group, it is other theological elements which for the present have been deprived a favoured position, among which we find the UFOs.

Apart from adding important details to our knowledge of The Family, this analysis, therefore, reminds us that religious systems are versatile and that the theological emphasis may change according to the social conditions in which a religion finds itself.

### Why UFOs at all?

In more general terms, it is relevant to ask why the controversial issue of UFOs was introduced at all into David Berg's teachings? Obviously, his preaching was not traditional Christianity, but this in itself does not account for the fact that flying saucers were incorporated into the belief system.

According to my sources, it seems that this element in The Family's teaching

was introduced around 1973. This period was characterised by a rather intense interest in UFOs in the public and at the same time, the endeavours of the counter-cult movement to fight the new religions were well on the way. As strong ties exist between Evangelical Christianity and the counter-cult movement, the notion of UFOs has long since been on the agenda of the counter-cultists. Could it be that David Berg's positive interest in UFOs was introduced as a reaction against the evangelical and counter-cultist interpretation of the 'flying saucers'? The Family's radical UFO-related exegesis runs counter to that of their more traditional Christian opponents, and we cannot ignore the possibility that the pressure on The Family (then called *Children of God*) from outside led to a positive interpretation of a UFO theme otherwise understood to be negative. Thus, the same issue is dealt with in antagonistic terms by religious groups placed in each corner of the ring. In both cases, however, the UFOs have become theologically meaningful. In the case of The Family it seems likely that the provocative understanding of the UFO concept was determined by the marginalised social status of the group and by the fact that Christians representing what The Family used to term 'The System' had (and still have) an opposing point of view. A marginalised and exposed religious group developed extreme and counter-cultural (or more correctly counter-mainstream-Church) religious ideas based on the set of popular metaphysical notions which we may term 'the UFO-myth'. Furthermore, a distinctive UFO-interpretation within The Family may add positively to the self-esteem of the believers, as their knowledge of what UFOs really are by far surpasses the ignorance and wonder of the public.

The status of David Berg was, I believe, another precondition to a successful introduction of the UFOs into the belief system. He was (and still is) considered a prophet, an individual who could speak with absolute authority. The fact that he grasped the UFOs while they were flying low in the public debate, indicates that his prophetic visions were, in some ways, well adapted to modern beliefs, but the relatively poor significance of the ufological dimension in his theology today shows that the UFO-perspective never became a pillar in his religious system.

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## NOTES

1. I would like to express my thanks to Family-members who have given me their trust and provided me with almost everything I have asked for.
2. Considering the fact that The Family is well-known and that the group has been introduced in several books and articles, I shall not present an introduction of the group here.
3. *In Search of The Fifth Dimension*. Excerpts from "Out of this World!", #686, 11/77. 55: UFO's and Flying Saucers. (p. 27 in xerox-copy with no other data. Obtained from The Family in Denmark, March 1994).

4. Flying Saucers!—UFO's!—Spiritual vehicles?—MO. 15. Xerox-copy from a MO-letter given to me by members of The Family in Denmark, March 1994. No references apart from the headline and the page no. 4794. Similar references, including UFO-pictures, can be found in several of The Family's coloured posters, for example "The Rescue!" by Al Eastman, David Fontaine and John Weaver, World Services, 1986. (See also Fontaine *et al.* 1989; for further details see note 6).
5. *Ibid.*
6. My translation from the Danish, *Flyvende tallerkener!—UFO'er!—Åndelige fartøjer?*, GP Nr. 623, 1977: 3. Apparently this letter is a Danish version of the text mentioned in note 4, but the photo-copy I received from The Family of that particular letter did not include the passage (the very last) which I have quoted from the Danish version. Further, the Danish version has September 30, 1973 as the original date of the English version, while the text mentioned in note 4 only has March 1994 on it. A theologically based editing process may have taken place sometime between 1977 and 1994, but I have not gone further into the matter.
7. Field notes, April 1994.
8. *Ibid.* It is interesting to observe that certain sources of secular ufology also tell about lightweight ufonauts "sufficient to withstand the tremendous deceleration and acceleration associated with their machinery" as stated by physicist Robert Sarbacher in a famous letter to UFO-researcher William Steinman (Clark, 1992: 112).
9. I have talked to Danish and British members of The Family on many occasions during 1993, 1994 and 1995.
10. As a matter of fact The Family in Denmark was severely attacked by the Christian Counter/Anti-Cult organization "Dialogcentret" ('The Dialogue Centre') during 1994 and 1995. The Family was initially accused of abusing children, and after the tragedy of the Solar Temple Order in Switzerland, The Family was said to plan a collective suicide. Both accusations were, of course, false, but the events may have led The Family to wanting to appear as 'normal' as possible in order to gain support from the public. Indeed the 'Dialogue Center' was stepping on thin ice. If so, the circumstances may explain why the UFO-dimension of The Family's theology was deliberately scaled down in Denmark at that time.
11. The text was originally included in a publication called *Heaven's Children!*, chapter 20, 1985.
12. I have failed to discover any concrete links between the very concept of UFOs as caretakers of the dead and similar ideas elsewhere, but this does not mean that such connections do not exist.
13. All quotes (including those in the notes) from pages 1–3 of the text (see note 10).
14. *Treasures*. World Services, 1987: 122. No author.
15. The text is from another poster, "The Picture Story of a Space Ship!" by Noel Lawrence and John Weaver, World Services, 1985. See also Fontaine *et al.*, 1989.
16. Cited from the poster "New-World Flyers!" by Al Eastman, Noel Lawrence and Bill Philips, World Services, 1986. See also Fontaine *et al.*, 1989.
17. A number of other indications of eschatological bearing are found by the believers. The notion of the Antichrist appearing through computers ("Internet may well be Satan's best means for distributing his message", one informant said) is but one example. One informant told me that he had seen the number 666 on a major bank's computer-registration of thousands of clients, and that this number, which is similar to the "Mark of the Beast", signifies the presence of the Antichrist in our society (field notes, February 1995).
18. *UFO-nyt* 1, 1996: 4.
19. This is according to a survey made by the Gallup Institute for the newspaper *Berlingske Tidende*, March 1995.
20. My copy of this particular text is in Danish, and it has no references. The drawings are by Al Eastman, Noel Lawrence and Bill Philips, and it was issued by World Services, Switzerland.

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