



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
JOURNALS + DIGITAL PUBLISHING

The Encyclopedic Sourcebook of UFO Religions

Review by: James R. Lewis

Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions, Vol. 8, No. 2 (November 2004), pp. 112-115

Published by: [University of California Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/nr.2004.8.2.112>

Accessed: 19/08/2012 05:10

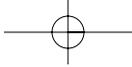
Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

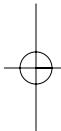
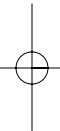


University of California Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

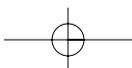


Nova Religio



The Encyclopedic Sourcebook of UFO Religions. Edited by James R. Lewis. Prometheus Books, 2003. 550 pages. \$99.00 cloth.

This hefty volume should stand for some time as the definitive work on UFO religions from the point of view of religious studies scholarship. Really a collection of papers rather than an encyclopedia in the usual



sense, it spans a goodly spectrum of groups, scholars, and scholarly points of view. Papers deal with, among other topics, the Aetherius Society, Unarius, Heaven's Gate, the Raelians, the Ashtar Command, and Chen Tao, the first five of this list being fully summarized in a documentary Appendix of well over a hundred pages. Writers include, among others, Hilary Evans, Mikael Rothstein, Robert Balch, David Taylor, Forrest Jackson, Susan Palmer, Ted Peters, John Saliba, Diana Tumminia, and Charles Ziegler. (By way of disclosure, I should add that the final article, a speculative piece on the possible religious impact of extraterrestrial contact, is by the present reviewer.)

The writers initially follow customary interpretation (e.g., Jung's "technological angels") in viewing religious UFOism as lightly secularized, "scientific" versions of traditional soteriology and apocalyptic, with the "contactee" as updated charismatic prophet. But they go on from there. Susan Palmer, in "The Raelian Apocalypse," has made another observation: at least in this case, as time has passed and apocalyptic expectations have not been met, "It seems reasonable to argue that the Raelian religion has begun to resemble a Club Med offering New Age therapies more closely than a flying saucer church" (p. 276). I suspect the same could be said regarding Aetherius and Unarius. On the other hand, "Heaven's Gate" by Balch and Taylor reminds us that the ongoing crisis of an aging apocalyptic group's restlessness and unrealized hopes can be managed by the leadership in the opposite direction of heightened seclusion and internal discipline, leading to the kind of resolution witnessed in the tragedy of Rancho Santa Fe. (The evidence of this "cult" in its most regimented phases also led these writers to comment, of the "brainwashing" hypothesis, "While most sociologists who study new religions dismiss the concept, the history of Heaven's Gate suggests that these scholars may have gone too far in their efforts to downplay the power of social influence" (p. 211).

The classic sociological study of a small UFO group, *When Prophecy Fails*, by Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, is revisited by Diana Tumminia in "How Prophecy Never Fails," a study of Unarius. Following J. Gordon Melton's 1985 article, "Spiritualization and Reaffirmation: What Really Happens When Prophecy Fails" (*American Studies* 26: 17–29), she suggests that over-emphasis on a single prophecy and its supposed "failure" amounts to a "one-dimensional view of millenarianism [that] neglects the presence of a complex cosmology or an integrated group life." When spaceships failed to appear as predicted in 1975 and later dates, the upshot for Unarius was not disconfirmation of the movement but reinterpretation through other sectors of an unfalsifiable belief system in karma, the reliving of past life events, and truths unknown to the public.

As we move into the twenty-first century, it appears that, barring some startling new development, general interest in UFOs has seriously

Nova Religio

declined, perhaps terminally, from its twentieth-century high. At the same time, the power of small, intensive UFO religious movements to energize true believers remains great, as the 1997 Heaven's Gate tragedy, the 1998 saucer-landing expectations of Chen Tao, and even more recent publicity concerning the Raelians, make evident. Nonetheless, several writers in this collection have contrasted statements of observers (including myself) about the smallness of UFO religious groups with polls indicating widespread public "belief" in UFOs. Surely what is needed is greater methodological clarity concerning distinctions between intensive and diffuse expressions of social movements, and the not-uncommon capacity of the former to linger among the highly committed well after vague, diffuse public interest has begun to fade.

Similar terminological clarification is required for apocalyptic. Although several writers in this book speak of UFO religion as apocalyptic, and Susan Palmer entitles her article "The Raelian Apocalyptic," John Saliba, in "The Earth Is a Dangerous Place: The Worldview of the Aetherius Society," queries my earlier use of the expression "apocalyptic theosophy" for that group's outlook, if "apocalyptic . . . includes an eschatological scenario that foretells the imminent end of the world" (p. 130)

While certainly an end of the world scenario represents the "classic" or paradigmatic form of apocalyptic, it does seem to me that the word is not misused if, by the same model, it refers to sudden, tremendous changes involving signs in the heavens and supernatural (or extraterrestrial!) intervention, and a soteriological passage through a time of troubles to a glorious new age. The question of the appropriateness of the term apocalyptic needs to be faced, for it arises in connection with other new and eastern religious movements as well. They often place anguish and radical renewal here below against a cyclical or "metaphysical" cosmology that precludes a literal end of the world, yet present a coming drama that functionally, and perhaps psychologically, amounts almost to the same thing.

Indeed, this sort of "apocalyptic" expectation seems to characterize long-lasting UFO religious groups, as over against the more sanguine progressive eschatology of independent contactees and more ephemeral groups, like those around such figures as George Adamski and Dan Fry. In this the latter were in the tradition of the Spiritualist mediumship that certainly has a historical relationship to UFO contacts. I recall 1950s-type contactees with such a background. That Spiritualist and broader esotericist connection of religious UFOism is not sufficiently brought out in this volume, although the important link to the I Am movement and its Ascended Masters is cited in several places. But it is true that, like I Am, the intensive UFO religions moved toward dramatic eschatologies, verging in the UFO case on "apocalyptic" as defined above.

No doubt the expectation of going through "apocalyptic" tribulations together requires a more closely-knit group than traversing benign

Book Reviews

vistas. As Melton and Tumminia suggest, this produces greater toughness against a skeptical world, despite alleged disconfirmations. Such groups may likewise survive longer than widespread but diffuse public credence in UFOs, since they believe in the set-apartness of the “ground crew” from the rest of humanity.

But whether the subjects survive or not, sociological studies of the caliber of many of these papers are important in themselves, as models of the art and for insights that will aid students in understanding many new and minority religious groups. Despite the price, *UFO Religions* is recommended for all major sociological collections.

Robert Ellwood, University of Southern California