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When Prophecy Never Fails: Myth and Reality in a Flying-Saucer Group

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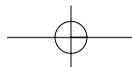
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*When Prophecy Never Fails: Myth and Reality in a Flying-Saucer Group.* By Diana G. Tumminia. Oxford University Press, 2005. iix + 216 pages. \$35.00 cloth.

The starting point of Tumminia's book is the study of a flying saucer group by Festinger et. al., who tried to explain why people adhere to illogical beliefs by applying the theory of cognitive dissonance, which maintains that when prophecy fails believers respond by a increasing their commitments and evangelical efforts. Tumminia in her study of Unarius Science of Life delves deeper in her explanation of why religious beliefs in UFOs survive by applying the theory of the construction of social reality and by trying to show how Unarians make sense of the world they themselves have created. Her book describes how the belief of Unarians were interwoven and sustained by the social interactions and practices of the members and shows how members understand the cosmos in the framework of their belief in past lives and extraterrestrials. The reader thus learns how Unarians think and perceive reality and how belief in flying saucers and aliens are part of their unquestioned worldview. She also attempts to demonstrate how an outsider can understand or interpret Unarian science, often called "fourth dimensional physics" or "interdimensional physics."

After discussing the ethnographic and methodological issues she had to face, Tumminia discusses how members of Unarius continued to maintain their belief in the prophetic message delivered by their leader Uriel, even though it repeatedly failed to materialize. Various communal activities—such as making movies about space wars that took place in the distant past, participating in elaborate pageants, and various explanations, such as their insistence that outsiders misunderstood the science—helped Unarians keep their faith alive. Tumminia concludes that "the failed prophecy did little to damage Unarius' credibility with most of its students" (43). Channeled messages from the Space Brothers helped allay the doubts and fears which members had in time of crises.



Tumminia shows how, given certain assumptions (like the belief in past lives), Unarius' worldview forms a coherent system that provides its members with meaning and purpose. This system itself is not subject to the common rules that would normally disconfirm day-to-day experiences. It acquires a life of its own. Outsiders, using another system of science and logic, would explain the Unarians' recalling in graphic detail of their many past lives, often lived in several of the 32 different planets in the Interplanetary Confederation, as mythological constructs unsupported by modern astronomy and unverifiable by modern empirical means.

Several chapters deal with dream classes and the way dream interpretation "served a typical sense-making function to justify decisions and their assumptions about the world" (115): with the death of Uriel the Archangel (Ruth Norman), their charismatic leader; with the preparation for the expected landing of the Space Brothers in 2001, an event which never took place; and with the way Unarians deal with their expectations when they do not materialize. Tumminia also employs Weber's routinization of charisma in which the organization is transformed into a stable institution once the prophetic leader dies. Change in Unarius took place through the advice of the Space Brothers and the wisdom of channeling their last leader Antares who, even after he died, continued to provide guidance and comfort.

The book contains three useful appendices: (1) a chronology of the history of Unarius Science of Life; (2) short stories of each of the 32 planets in the Interplanetary Confederation; and (3) a list of the 43 incarnations of Uriel. Besides several endnotes to each chapter, there is also a bibliographical reference (199–209) and an index (211–16). Tumminia does not include sociological details about, for example, the members and their education backgrounds.

This is an excellent study of a UFO group which many people would find perplexing, to say the least. Tumminia's method of observation is almost flawlessly applied and the reader is amazed at how she managed to get into the way Unarians think without becoming a member herself. The book is also enhanced by the reference to many interviews with Unarian students and with records of how they themselves recalled their elaborate past lives, interpreted both their dreams and the world around them, and coped with disappointments. It is a fine example of scholarship, and it is written in a style which both students and general readers will find informative and understandable.

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