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Review Essay

The Study of UFO Religions

John A. Saliba

Aliens Adored: Raël's UFO Religion. By Susan Palmer. Rutgers University Press, 2004. 226 pages. $60.00 cloth; $19.95 paper.

Encyclopedia of American Religions. By J. Gordon Melton. 7th ed. Gale, 2003. xxiv + 1408 pages. $320.00 cloth.

Encyclopedic Sourcebook of UFO Religions. Edited by James R. Lewis. Prometheus Books, 2003. 530 pages. $75.00 cloth.

New Religions: A Guide: New Religious Movements, Sects and Alternative Spiritualities. Edited by Christopher Partridge. Oxford University Press, 2004. 444 pages. $40.00 cloth.

UFO Religions. Edited by Christopher Partridge. London and New York: Routledge, 2003. xiii + 383 pages. $104.00 cloth; $29.95 paper.

UFOs and Popular Culture: An Encyclopedia of Contemporary Myth. By James R. Lewis. ABC-CLIO, 2000. xxxviii + 393 pages. $99.00 cloth.

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

Several recent studies of UFO religions may be indicative of a rise in scholarly interest in these fringe religious groups. Probably, the best research on these religions was first embodied in James Lewis' edited work, *The Gods Have Landed*,[1] which, though published over ten years ago, remains one of the most quoted and referenced manuals on the subject. While this book contains studies of only three distinct UFO religions, it includes important overviews of literature both on the contactee phenomenon and on the religious, sociological, and psychological aspects of UFO beliefs.

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One of the reasons for this rise in interest has been the highly publicized events concerning three UFO religions: (1) the 1997 Heaven's Gate incident, which left thirty-nine members dead by suicide; (2) the sudden rise to fame in 1998 of Chen Tao, whose prophetic message that God will appear on television and send flying saucers to save the world ended in both the failure of the prophecy and possibly the demise of its founder's community as a UFO group[2]; and, (3) more recently, the growth of the International Raëlian Movement, particularly following the announcement in 2002 that Clonaid—which is often assumed to be its scientific arm[3]—had successfully cloned a human being, named Eve.

The more recent publications reviewed in this essay can be conveniently divided into three types: (1) encyclopedias on new religious movements, which include short items on various UFO religions; (2) collections of essays that (a) cover a variety of these religions or (b) discuss either the contactee phenomenon in general or the theoretical aspects of these movements in particular; and (3) two major monographs on specific UFO religions. In this review, I will first examine what the encyclopedias tell us about UFO religions, reflecting on three questions encountered in the studying them: What exactly is a UFO religion? How many UFO religions are there? And, how many members do they have? Secondly, I will review the literature on specific UFO religions, concentrating on four major groups: the Raëlian Movement, Unarius Academy of Science, the Aetherius Society, and Heaven's Gate. I will draw attention to some of the information about and interpretations of these movements that have been provided by scholars who have studied them. I will also look briefly at those studies which consider UFO religions as a whole and which seek to make comparisons between UFO groups and other religious movements. To end this section, I will comment on the limitations of the current studies and offer several suggestions for future research.

Finally, I will show that the presence of UFO religions, however small and apparently insignificant they might be, is indicative of a much wider interest in extraterrestrial life forms. The relevance of the study of UFO religions can be shown with reference to (1) the work of various scientists who are exploring the physical conditions required to maintain extraterrestrial life, and (2) the reflections of several contemporary scholars who have either drawn attention to the long history of speculation about other worlds or who have reflected on the theological issues that must be dealt with if intelligent extraterrestrial life exists.

WHAT IS A UFO RELIGION AND HOW MANY OF THEM ARE THERE?

One of the nagging problems when studying UFO movements is whether, and in what sense, they are religions. Many, if not the majority, of those who believe in UFOs attach little if any religious

or spiritual significance either to their sightings or to the purported involvement of UFOs in human history. Among some UFO groups that have been studied as religions, the very word "religion" is purposely avoided or is reinterpreted. Thus, while members of the International Raëlian Movement have no difficulty with the designation, "Raëlian Religion," they make it clear that their worldview is not cast in the mold of traditional religions, in which belief in the sacred or transcendent is dominant. The Aetherius Society states quite explicitly that it "is not a new religion . . . it is a spiritual path to enlightenment and the cosmic evolution of mankind,"[4] while the Unarius Academy of Science prefers to be called "an educational and scientific organization" which teaches the "interdimensional psychodynamics of the mind."[5]

One of the more detailed analyses of the religious nature of UFO groups is the one I wrote some ten tears ago.[6] There I stated that aliens are surrounded with a sense of mystery. They are regarded as transcendent and supernatural entities who have reached a level of perfection and power far beyond that of human beings. Moreover, they are believed to communicate with specific individuals in order to bring salvation to a human race threatened by nuclear and environmental disaster. More recently, in James Lewis' *Encyclopedic Sourcebook of UFO Religions* (pp.191–208), I used several models to show why Unarius can be considered a religion.

Under the influence of Ninian Smart, many scholars of religion have tended to stay away from precise definitions of religion and have adopted his idea that one can find a number of dimensions (or characteristic features) in any religion, even though the importance and magnitude of each dimension may vary from one religion to another. Smart listed seven dimensions of religion: (1) the ritual or practical; (2) the doctrinal or philosophical; (3) the mythic or narrative; (4) the experiential or emotional; (5) the ethical or legal; (6) the organizational or social; and (7) the material or artistic.[7] He assumed that the "sacred" is present in all religions and penetrates all these dimensions. Other scholars, however, have added the "sacred" as a separate dimension, one that can also be used to assess the religious nature of UFO groups.[8] In terms of these dimensions, there are many differences among UFO religions. Some have an elaborate ritual and/or mythology, while others do not. Several groups have regular communal worship services; others have little or none. Some have a core membership that lives communally, while members of other groups live independently. Quite a few UFO religions are widespread, with a presence on several continents, others are more limited geographically, and some apparently exist mainly on the Internet. Further, the level of organization and commitment varies between groups considerably.

Six main characteristics set UFO religions apart as a unique phenomenon that came into being in the second half of the twentieth century:

(1) A belief in extraterrestrial beings, who reside mainly, but not exclusively, in our solar system. God (in the Judeo-Christian sense) often does not have a central role, is not present at all, or his existence is at times denied.[9]

(2) An emphasis on a relationship between aliens and human beings. Some groups have a myth of human origin and stories of visits by aliens throughout human history. Some UFO religions have adopted Erich von Däniken's theory of the origins of the human race, which rejects the current theory of evolution.[10]

(3) A strong belief that that there have been a series of encounters and communications between human beings and aliens. Select individuals are believed to be channels, messengers, or prophets chosen to relay messages to the human race, to have met personally with alien beings, and even to have been transported to other planets. Some, such as the leaders of the Extraterrestrial Earth Mission, claim to be "walk-ins," that is, individual alien beings have inhabited the bodies of humans (Lewis, *UFOs and Popular Culture*, pp. 117–19). Though, usually, there is only one leader of a UFO group who is accepted as the contact with aliens, there are a few examples, such as the Lightside UFO Study Group, where the leading members are all contactees and/or walk-ins. In cases where the contactee is deceased, as in Unarius and the Aetherius Society, there is evidence that the movements have gone through an organizational period which Max Weber called the "routinization of charisma."[11]

(4) A conviction that aliens are visiting Earth to offer help for human beings. They warn of impending disasters, such as nuclear war and environmental crisis. While there are trends in some Christian circles to demonize aliens,[12] UFO religions are inclined to look on extraterrestrials as beneficent, even though the existence of evil aliens is not ruled out.

(5) A belief that a millennial age will begin with the public advent of the aliens. Human beings will receive more advanced technology and make great evolutionary strides in both the physical and spiritual realms. Some apocalyptic scenarios, if the human race is not ready to receive or welcome the aliens, are also present.

(6) A stress on the need for human beings to make preparations for the public arrival of the aliens. These preparations are usually of a spiritual nature, but physical plans may also be proposed, as in the case of the Raëlian Movement, whose members have already designed an embassy to house the aliens when they arrive.

Several encyclopedic publications include references to UFO religions. The most reliable source of information on these is J. Gordon Melton's *Encyclopedia of American Religions* (pp. 798–808), although the information in this latest edition does not add much to previous editions. Though not all the groups he includes could be classified as "religions," Melton lists twenty-three "Flying Saucer Groups," and provides a brief history and account of their main beliefs, as well as references to some of their main publications. While he gives their addresses when these are available, of the twenty-three groups listed, the addresses or post offices boxes for ten of them could not be traced. Besides, two of the listed groups are defunct, and Heaven's Gate, Chen Tao, and the United Nuwaubian Nation of Moors are notably omitted..

James R. Lewis' encyclopedia, *UFOs and Popular Culture*, includes about twenty-five entries of what might be called "Flying Saucer Groups," seventeen of which are also found in Melton's *Encyclopedia of American Religions*. Like Melton, Lewis provides a brief historical background and information on basic beliefs, though he omits details such as the addresses of those groups that can be contacted. One surprising inclusion in Lewis' encyclopedia is the Church of Scientology. In a three-page entry, Andreas Grünschloss (pp. 266–48) observes a number of ufological strands in Scientology, namely, its anthropological framework, its founding myth, its belief in past lives, its attempts to unite spiritual with scientific progress, and the importance of Hubbard's science fiction novels in the ongoing development of the group. Melton prefers to include Scientology in his section on "Psychic New Age Groups" and makes no reference to its UFO motifs.

Another publication is Christopher Partridge's guide to new religious movements, *New Religions*, in which one finds somewhat lengthier entries on the Nuwaubians, the Aetherius Society, the Unarius Academy of Science, the International Raëlian Movement, Heaven's Gate, and Chen Tao. Obviously, this is not a book that tries to include all UFO religions. In it, though, a short essay by Grünschloss (pp. 372–76) gives the historical background to the rise of Ufology and distinguishes between apocalyptic strands (as in the Ashtar Command) and non-apocalyptic strands (as in Scientology and the Aetherius Society). He also observes that among the prominent themes of these UFO religions is the synthesis of science and religion.

Together, these three encyclopedias offer some valuable information on the number and variety of current UFO religious groups, but the material they contain is understandably brief and incomplete, and their usefulness in any research is limited. None of them contain references to the Web sites of UFO groups, even though several of the groups mentioned maintain a presence on the Internet.

It is difficult to give even a rough estimate of the number of UFO religions. I have traced the following dozen active UFOs groups that have

a conspicuous presence on the Internet: the International Raëlian Movement (<www.rael.org>); Unarius Academy of Science (<www.unarius.org>); the Aetherius Society (<www.aetherius.org>); Ashtar Command (<www.sanandaseagles.com/gai/gai_index.html>), which has incorporated the Association for Sananda and Sanat Sumara, and is now called "Guardian Activation International"; The Ground Crew (<www.thegroundcrew.com>); Mark Age (<www.thenewearth.org/markage>); Planetary Activation Organization (<www.paoweb.com>), which is a splinter group from The Ground Crew; United Nuwaubian Nation of Moors (<www.unitednuwaubiannation.com>); Universal Industrial Church of the New World Comforter (<www.galactic.org/UIC.html>); Extraterrestrial Earth Mission (<www.geocities.com/etearthmission>); Lightside UFO Study Group (<www.thelightside.org>); and The Aquarian Concepts Community (<www.aquarianconcepts.org>). All of these are based in the English-speaking world, particularly in the United States, but quite a few of them have members on different continents.[13] Two other groups, namely, Heaven's Gate and Chen Tao, have been studied extensively, and the former's mirror site is still available on the Internet.[14]

The Urantia Foundation, sometimes referred to as the "Jesusonian Foundation," has two extensive official Web sites (<www.urantia.org> and <www.truthbook.com>). Though at times listed as a UFO religion, it is, strictly speaking, not so. Sarah Lewis (in Partridge, *UFO Religions*, pp. 142–43) states that the Urantia Book does not advocate a new religion. Melton (*Encyclopedia of American Religions*, pp. 439–40) includes it under "Psychic and New Age Groups," and Lewis (*UFOs and Popular Religion*) omits it entirely. Lorne Dawson (in Partridge, *New Religions*, p. 370) writes that the "sole activity of the membership is to study the book, often in groups. There are no clergy or churches."

It is equally difficult to estimate the number of people who are involved in UFO religions. Almost none of them report the number of their respective members. The only solid figure in Melton's *Encyclopedia of American Religions* (pp. 798ff.) is the Raëlians' 2002 claim to 55,000 members, an increase of about 20,000 since 1999. One other group, Deval UFO, Inc., is estimated to have four hundred members in the United States, as well as members in Japan and Australia. Reportedly, the Aetherius Society has circulated 650 copies of its newsletter in 1987. It is not clear whether these latter figures reported in the *Encyclopedia of American Religions* were provided by the groups themselves, are Melton's own estimate, or were derived by survey. Heaven's Gate had only thirty-nine members at the time of suicides in 1997, far less that the original number of about two hundred members reported by Robert Balch and Robert Taylor in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Of the twelve groups listed above, the Aquarian Concepts Community (located in Sedona, Arizona) describes itself as an "intentional global community" and states

that it comprises eighty adult members and twenty children.[15] The Lightside UFO Study Group (located in Oshkosh, Wisconsin) has six core members. While weekly Sunday meetings and yearly conferences are held, there is no information about the number of participants and/or committed members beyond this core group.

Of the still active groups that have been the subject of significant research, namely, the Raëlian Movement, Unarius, and the Aetherius Society, actual membership figures have been estimated by several scholars. The largest of these is the International Raëlian Movement, which seems to have grown over the last ten years or so. Susan Palmer (in Lewis, *UFOs and Popular Culture*, p. 249) reported its membership at around 45,000 with branches in fifty-two countries. In her own book, *Aliens Adored*, (p. 120), she revised this figure, stating that the "2002 international membership was fifty-five thousand, and in 2003, sixty-five thousand, but this number refers to Raëlians who have been baptized rather than to active Raëlians."[16] Palmer concedes that these are the movement's figures and are probably inflated.[17] While the number of members given by the movement is impossible to verify, she maintains that "their statistics regarding their structure are quite reliable" (*Aliens Adored*, p. 122). Her participation at Raëlian meetings shows clearly that the number of Raëlians by far exceeds the membership of other groups. Palmer (*Aliens Adored*, p. 120) describes a typical profile of a member of the Raëlian Movement as follows:

> I would say that, in Quebec at least, the movement attracts young, attractive adults, from a Catholic background that they have already rejected, who are upwardly mobile in society, ambitious in their education and careers, and individualistic and fun loving. Like many Quebecois youth, they reject conventional middle class and Christian family values, live alone or with a partner outside wedlock, and postpone or veto reproduction. They tend to revere science and despise religious institutions, particularly the Catholic Church.

Membership in Unarius and in the Aetherius Society, on the other hand, is much smaller. Writing on Unarius (in Lewis, *UFOs and Popular Culture*, p. 402), Diana Tumminia states:

> Findings from a survey and subsequent field research show that the core group has never numbered more that 65 people. Although Unarius has reportedly gained thousands of members around the world, their "nucleus" has averaged around 45 to 50 people per year until recently when it began to decline.

In *When Prophecy Never Fails* (pp.190–91), Tumminia also draws up a profile of Unarius' members. She writes that they are largely white, though there are study groups in Nigeria and in Central America. Women slightly

outnumbered men in her earlier survey, when members "held mostly working-class jobs and incomes, helping each other to obtain employment and sometimes sharing apartments. By 2000, most core members had modest middle-class incomes and white-collar jobs, while a portion were retirees" (p. 190). Most were "apolitical" with "little interest in outside groups or political issues." Eighty-five percent were single.

There are no surveys of Aetherius Society members. The most detailed account of its membership is on its Web site,[18] which, while omitting the actual number of members, gives the addresses where Society groups are located and can be contacted. The Aetherius Society distinguishes three categories of membership: "Friends of the Society," "Associate Membership," and "Full Membership," the latter two indicating the level of commitment and benefits received. Organizationally, an unspecified distinction is made between headquarters, branches, and groups, although branches seem to refer to centers where there is a sufficient number of members for regular rituals to be held. In Europe, the headquarters are located in London, and there are two branches and twelve groups throughout Great Britain. The only other presence of the Society in Europe is one group in Lisbon. The United States has one headquarters, one branch and four groups, while only two groups exist in Canada. Australia has one branch and one group. In Africa there are one branch and five groups in Ghana, two branches and nine groups in Nigeria, and one group in South Africa. Judging from my prolonged contact with the Michigan Branch (Detroit area), the number of members there is relatively small, maybe not more than thirty. And again, judging from my many visits to the group's services, the number of those participating has decreased over the last twenty-five years. I estimate that the active members of the Society would be between one and two thousand, a figure that might also include "friends," like myself, who are given a membership card.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Two recent collections of essay, edited respectively by Partridge (2003) and Lewis (2003), and two monographs, one by Palmer (2004) on the Raëlian Movement, the other by Tumminia (2005) on Unarius, are the best recent sources for the study of UFO religions. Two types of essays are included in both edited volumes: studies of individual UFO groups, and more general essays dealing with special issues or themes that are relevant to the topic of UFO religion. Between them, these two books include nineteen essays that cover eight UFO religions specifically: the Raëlian Movement, Unarius Academy of Science, the Aetherius Society, Heaven's Gate, the United Nuwaubian Nation, Ashtar Command, Chen Tao, and The Ground Crew. Indeed, eleven scholars contribute thirteen essays to the examination of the first four of these groups.

The Raëlian Movement

The leading researcher on the Raëlian Movement is undoubtedly Susan Palmer whose studies date from the mid-1990s.[19] Palmer's begins her in-depth study of the Raëlian Movement by describing her research methodology and relating some of the difficulties she encountered in dealing with Raëlians. She devotes a whole chapter to Raël as the prophet of this new religion and provides a good account of the goals, ideals, and practices of the movement. She includes one chapter on the internal problems of the movement with reference to many defectors, and another to the announcement by the movement that its scientists had succeeded in cloning a human being. She concludes that the "Raelians are significant because they bridge the cultural and cognitive gap between science and religion" (*Aliens Adored*, p. 200). She looks upon them as "essentially post modernists" who are fundamentalists in their religious beliefs about Raël, the planet of the Elohim, and a creation story which has no room for evolution. In one of her essays (in Lewis, *Encyclopedic Sourcebook of UFO Religions*, pp. 262–89), Palmer investigates the apocalyptic and millenarian views of the Raëlians and compares official statements found in their revealed books and unofficial beliefs passed on by word of mouth. She finds "a creative tension between the pessimism of the apocalyptic view and the optimism of the millenarian view" (p. 262). She also draws a brief profile of Raël and summarizes the movement's millenarian activities and goals.

Two other scholars have also contributed to the study of the Raëlians. Mikael Rothstein (in Lewis, *Encyclopedic Sourcebook of UFO Religions*, pp. 281–89) examines the structure and mythological basis of the Embassy that Raël has been instructed to build for the Elohim. He explains how the not yet built Embassy is a symbol of the millennium and how it serves as a sacred space, a place of communication with the aliens, and a place for pilgrimages. Like temples, churches, mosques, and sacred shrines, the Embassy is a means of communicating with the aliens who, although not equated with gods, are transcendent beings in all respects. And he shows how the Embassy has a religious function, since it has both millenarian and eschatological meanings.

George Chryssides (in Partridge, *UFO Religions*, pp. 45–61) observes that the Raëlian religion has a coherent worldview which is scientific, hedonistic, materialistic, and atheistic. Its success is due, in part at least, to its efforts to deal with secularization and modern science, both of which are contemporary and unresolved challenges to traditional religions. Chryssides is the only scholar who offers some critical reflections on the movement. He finds several problems inherent in its belief system, problems that are bound to limit its appeal. Because it is based on the revelation to one individual, a revelation that is not scientifically verifiable, one has to accept its "scientific creationism" on faith. Moreover,

Chryssides argues that religious dialogue with Raëlians is impossible because they take literally Raël's encounters with the Elohim and accept uncritically his unique interpretations of the Bible, particularly his exegesis of the rather strange story in Genesis 6:1–4.[20] He further states that Raëlians seem oblivious to the moral and philosophical problems linked with human cloning. He concludes that:

> the movement experiences an intellectual introversion which can only hamper its progress, since its fails to subject to critical discussion beliefs that the dominant culture finds problematic. Such beliefs are principally its belief that extraterrestrials are in contact with humanity, Raël's idiosyncratic biblical exegesis, its undemocratic élitism, and its failure to address ethical issues associated with politics and genetics. (p.60)

Unarius Academy of Science

The leading researcher on the Unariuns is Diana Tumminia, who has been studying them for about two decades and who has published a number of essays since the mid-1990s.[21] Portions of these essays are incorporated in her recent book, *When Prophecy Never Fails*, in which she applies Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's[22] theory of the social construction of reality to demonstrate how the members of Unarius make sense of the world they have created and to understand how the majority of the Unariuns did not lose their faith when the prophecies of their leader, the archangel Uriel, failed repeatedly. Tumminia shows how the myth of flying saucers has become part of the Unariuns' perceived reality, how it is derived from and maintained by social interactions, and how it is exhibited in the sharing of dreams and past life experiences. She illustrates how the interplay between myth and reality can be observed in their healing practices and dream sharing, both of which are intimately connected to their belief in extraterrestrial beings and to their own past lives that are remembered and at times expressed in group psychodrama.

In one of her essays (in Partridge, *UFO Religions*, pp. 62–82) she examines the history and social structure of Unarius and shows how this UFO group is an example of the Weber's model of charismatic authority. In another essay (in Lewis, *Encyclopedic Sourcebook of UFO Religions*, pp. 173–90) she points out how Unariuns dealt with the failure of the prophecies made by Uriel.[23] Instead of abandoning their faith, most Unariuns accepted the interpretation that, in her prophetic statements and preparation for her departure with the aliens, Uriel was actually experiencing one of her past lives as the Egyptian goddess, Isis.

Tumminia also makes a valuable contribution to the method used in studying new religions. Her discussion of the participant-observation technique brings out not only the many practical problems she encountered

in her research, but also the theoretical dilemmas she faced in trying to enter into the unique worldview of the Unariuns without accepting it and becoming a full-fledged member.[24]

In my own examination of Unarius as a religion (in Lewis, *Encyclopedic Sourcebook of UFO Religions*, pp. 191–208), I provide a brief description of the organization and its belief in alien intelligences, in God as an impersonal force, in the nature of human beings, and in the millennium. I suggest that several models, like my own list of religious elements found in UFO religions, Smart's dimensions of religions, and Bryan Wilson's inventory of twenty items found in religions,[25] can be usefully applied to understand Unarius as a religion. I conclude by stating that Unarius "attempts to give a broader picture of the universe, a more inclusive worldview, which fits more comfortably with our present discoveries in the field of astronomy" (p. 205). In other words, I see Unarius as an attempt, though not a very successful one, to bridge the traditional gap between religion and science.

The Aetherius Society

Several scholars have contributed to the study of the Aetherius Society, one of the oldest UFO religions. My own study (in Lewis, *Encyclopedic Sourcebook of UFO Religions*, pp. 123–142) is largely ethnographic.[26] After a brief account of the movement's history and organization, I describe its major beliefs, operations and missions, and ritual practices, and conclude by reflecting on its apocalyptic and millenarian concerns. I explain how their imminent expectations are toned down by their belief that the next master will come only when human beings are ready to receive him. Further, since the process of institutionalization or routinization of charisma started before the founder died in 1997, I argue that the Society will persist. Like Unarius, the Aetherius Society makes what I think is a weak effort to unite religion and science and, again, like Unarius, it stresses the need for healing.

Scott Scribner and Gregory Wheeler's essay (in Lewis, *Encyclopedic Sourcebook of UFO Religions*, pp. 157–71) on the Aetherius Society is also ethnographic since it concentrates on describing various ritual services attended by the authors. It includes brief but rather incomplete notes about levels of group membership and dedication, as well as the background of its members. Simon G. Smith's essay (in Partridge, *UFO Religions*, pp. 84–102) offers a history of the Society from its origin through its development over the last fifty years. He outlines the role of its founder, George King, and maintains that this role has changed from being a medium for extraterrestrials to taking a more active role in Society's mission to save the Earth. In other words, when King founded the Aetherius Society, his position was that of the primary messenger of the extraterrestrials with whom he communicated on a regular basis and

whose instructions he followed. Later, as his status developed, he was regarded as almost equal to the extraterrestrials themselves. As this happened, he became a more active participant in, and contributor to, their mission to save Earth from destruction.

Smith ends by making several interesting suggestions, such as the stress on "the importance of karma in the ritual and spiritual activity of the movement" (p. 99) as a means to explain how the Society has survived the death of its founder. Mikael Rothstein's essay (in Lewis, *Encyclopedic Sourcebook of UFO Religions*, pp. 143–56) is more theoretical in nature. It looks at how members of the Aetherius Society conceive of the past, the present, and the future, discusses how these conceptions of time are interrelated, and how they produce the group's characteristic millennial vision.

Heaven's Gate

The contributions of Robert Balch and David Taylor to the study of Heaven's Gate are well-known.[27] In their most recent essay (in Lewis, *Encyclopedic Sourcebook on UFO Religions*, pp. 211–37) they concentrate on the commitment process that led people to abandon everything to follow the leaders of Heaven's Gate who promised them eternal life in outer space. They outline the history of the group from its foundation, and record the members' commitment process, the movement's decline when the leaders vanished for a while, and its eventual revitalization. The changes that Heaven's Gate went through are explained through the social drift and social influence models. The authors stress that Heaven's Gate has important implications for the study of commitment, in that it implies a conversion that "refers to a profound psychological change in which members come to identify so completely with a new belief system that their very being becomes one with it" (p. 234).

The Heaven's Gate suicides are explored by Ted Peters (in Lewis, *Encyclopedic Sourcebook of UFO Religions*, pp. 239–60) and James Lewis (in Partridge, *UFO Religions*, pp. 103–28). Peters maintains that the UFO phenomenon is an intrinsically religious one and points out that from the insider's point of view the members did not commit suicide. Rather, they thought they were opening the door to salvation, to reach the higher level that was part of their religious ideology. Lewis starts by reflecting on Weber's legitimation of charisma, which he contends does not offer a satisfactory explanation of suicide. He places the Heaven's Gate belief system in larger, spiritual sub-cultural settings, particularly that of the New Age. This system overshadows the personality of the leader and addresses the concerns of the members. He concludes that "the notions that death is a potentially positive experience and that one can exit one's body to consciously re-emerge in another realm are simply not odd or irrational within religious communities, New Age, or otherwise" (p. 127).

Other studies, such as those by Theodore Gabriel on the Nuwaubians (Partridge, *UFO Religions*, pp. 149-61), Christopher Helland on the Ashtar Command (Partridge, *UFO Religions*, pp. 162–78), and Susan Palmer and Christopher Helland on The Ground Crew (Lewis, *Encyclopedic Sourcebook of UFO Religions*, pp. 331-46), are useful not only because of their presentation of new data previously unavailable in scholarly literature, but also for their efforts to compare the variety of beliefs and practices of UFO religions. One of the common features of these studies is that they depict the worldviews of UFO religions as accurately as possible, and make several attempts to draw up some theoretical bases for understanding them. This is rather challenging, since each UFO religion has its unique features. The Raëlian movement, for example, has a strong anti-catholic rhetoric that is not found in other UFO religions and this is something that requires further study.

Lewis' and Partridge's collections contain several essays that do not deal directly with particular groups, but rather provide different backgrounds and information that throw light on the emergence of such religions and propose theoretical frameworks for understanding them in a wider context. Also, Lewis' collection, *Encyclopedic Sourcebook of UFO Religions*, includes several essays that measure UFO beliefs, survey contactee religions, or speculate on the meaning or future of UFO religions. Robert Bartholomew, for example, sees modern UFO religions as having a symbolic function, namely, to express the sacred in a secular world. They are also a sign of "the innovative human capacity to adapt to change and find meaning in a myriad ways" (p. 91). Tumminia sees flying saucers as postmodern myths. She writes that with "the dawning of the 'rational' technological age, social scientists expected secularization and science to wipe out supernatural and magical religions. This has not happened. Instead, a magical enchanted worldview subverted the scientific paradigm into an animistic account of space beings that was readily available for our mass consumption" (p. 103).

In one of the more interesting essays, Grünschloss expounds the view that some UFO religions can be compared to cargo cults. "Cargo cults" is the name given by anthropologists to a group of new religious movements in Melanesia.[28] Members of these movements believe that their ancestors will be sending cargoes of Western European goods by means of airplanes. The comparison between UFO religions and cargo cults is further developed by Gary Trompf (in Partridge, *UFO Religions*, pp. 221 ff.), who dwells on the similarity between their respective apocalyptic and millenarian dimensions. The millenarian motif is definitely shared by cargo cults and UFO religions, even though the goods and airplanes in the former are, unlike the flying saucers and the advanced technology of the latter, visible to all and already made present by the advent of the colonial powers. Mikael Rothstein, on the other hand, thinks that this difference is not very important from a millenarian perspective.[29]

But it could also be argued that the difference is significant because the millenarian motif, though similar in some respects, differs radically in others. Members of cargo cults, for example, can more easily claim that both the cargo (European goods) and its mode of delivery (airplanes) are feasible expectations because they can be observed directly by members and non-members alike. This is certainly not the case with UFO religions, whose members' belief in flying saucers, extraterrestrials, and advanced technology is not subject to similar investigation by non-members.

Partridge's volume also includes a section containing theoretical essays on UFO religions. Mikael Rothstein, (Partridge, *UFO Religions*, pp. 256–73) shows how UFO lore has been marginally incorporated into the worldview of several religious groups, such as the Baha'i faith, Mormonism, the Church of Scientology, and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. Two other essays deal with UFO phenomena from a psychological perspective: in one, Robert Segal, expounds Jung's view on flying saucers (Partridge, *UFO Religions*, pp. 312-28), while in the other I outline various interpretations which leading psychologists have given to the UFO phenomenon (Partridge, *UFO Religions*, pp. 329–45). Though these two essays are not directly related to UFO religions, they deal with how psychologists have explained the persistent belief in UFOs and with the mythological elements that pervade UFO culture.

The literature reviewed in this essay provides a good starting point for the study of UFO religions; but much more needs to be done. Besides dealing with the research problems already referred to, a more accurate picture of how widespread UFO religions are is required. Like those of Palmer and Tumminia, there is also the need for more in-depth studies of particular UFO groups. Attempts must be made to see whether various theories used to understand UFO religions, such as those of the social construction of reality and the phenomenon of cargo cults, can be applied to a larger number of UFO religions. The applicability to UFO religions of various sociological and psychological theories of the UFO phenomenon has to be tested, though some work along these lines may already be in progress.[30]

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF UFO RELIGIONS

Belief in flying saucers and in the existence of extraterrestrial life is common. Analyzing various polls taken in the United States, for example, Charles A. Ziegler concludes that "tens of millions of adults in the United States believe that some UFOs are manifestations of an un-Earthly intelligence. In other words, that belief is not confined to an aberrant few but, rather, its burgeoning in the last half of the twentieth century is a major cultural event that warrants further studies by social scientists, including those with special interests in religion" (in Lewis, *Encyclopedic Sourcebook of UFO Religions*, p. 355) . The possibility of

extraterrestrial life raises both scientific and religious questions. This is not surprising since interest and belief in alien beings is directly related to our contemporary knowledge of the universe. Modern astronomy has extended our frontiers of knowledge and has led to speculations about the kind of life that might exist in other galaxies and consequently about the type of cultures and religions that might have developed in different parts of the universe. Although current scientific research has found no convincing proof of intelligent life elsewhere in the universe and no hard evidence of flying saucers or aliens here on Earth, the possibility that we are not alone in the universe cannot be dismissed.[31]

Another survey, the "Alexander UFO Report Crisis Survey" (in Lewis, *Encyclopedic Sourcebook of UFO Religions*, pp. 359–70) examines the religious response to the possible existence of alien intelligences. Victor Alexander states that the results "conclusively demonstrate that the religious leaders surveyed believed that the faith of their parishioners is both sufficiently strong and flexible to accommodate this information" (p. 368), and that "religious leaders did not believe that their faith and the faith of their congregations would be challenged by contact with an advanced extraterrestrial civilization—one with or without a religion. According to many of the respondents, it would confirm God's glory as creator of the universe" (p. 369). The Alexander report, however, did not look into the theological implications of extraterrestrial life, nor did it explore how its respondents would make sense of alien creatures in the context of their own religious views. Even though membership in UFO religions is so small that one can conclude that their impact on the major religions will be minimal, their presence offers a significant challenge which most, if not all, religions have to face: how does one incorporate our expanding scientific view of the cosmos into a religious world view that has been rather Earthbound?

At least two minor disciplines, "exobiology" and "exotheology," have arisen as a result of these questions. Respectively, they reflect the scientific and theological questions that are asked about extraterrestrial intelligences or beings. Both disciplines are highly speculative, but they are indicative of the human quest for knowledge of the universe as a whole and the rejection of the provincial attitude that limits research to the planet Earth. Stephen J. Dick, the chief historian at NASA, has edited a collection of essays that are a clear indication of the current interest among scholars from diverse academic backgrounds in the possibility of extraterrestrial life.[32]

Exobiology, also known as astrobiology, studies the prospects of life outside our planet.[33] It speculates on the conditions that might give rise to life, on the type of lifeforms that might have developed in different and yet unknown environments, and on the possibility of communicating with extraterrestrial beings, if they exist. No scientist would maintain that there is alien life of any sort on earth. Peter D. Ward, a paleontologist

at the University of Washington in Seattle, states explicitly: "We know nothing of alien life of Earth (other than the aliens that we have constructed, of course), only that it might exist."[34]

Exotheology, or astrotheology, is a branch of theology which investigates the theological issues that need to be considered if extraterrestrial life exists and if we ever make contact with extraterrestrial intelligences. How, for example, would contemporary theologies cope with different worldviews, supernatural beings, and moral injunctions?

Theological and philosophical interest in other worlds has a long history.[35] In Christian theological discourse the issues discussed have included whether God could have created worlds different from ours and whether intelligent aliens would have a religious and/or spiritual condition that is sinful and in need for salvation. Moreover, the question of the role of Christ in this broader view of the cosmos remains to be worked out. Because early speculations dealt with different worlds that were beyond human knowledge and contact, the debate remained within the academic community. Modern scientific explorations and mass communication have extended the debate to a wider readership.[36]

Christian theologians are taking the possibility of extraterrestrial life seriously, even though we have no evidence that such life exists and we have no idea, if it does exist, whether contact with it is either possible or likely to occur in the near future. John Haught argues that "even the mere entertainment of the prospect of eventual contact—whether it ever actually occurs or not—is a wholesome expansive exercise for theology. And it seems appropriate even now to ponder some of the questions that an encounter with other worlds of intelligent beings would raise for theological thought."[37] He maintains that contact with alien life will have a great impact on many traditional beliefs regarding, for example, the concept of God, the nature and importance of human beings, and cosmic purpose. He suggests that "the cosmic vision of Teilhard de Chardin as well as process theology (based on the concepts of the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead) are both already inherently open to be developed into a 'theology after contact'."[38] Another theologian, Thomas Keith Hoffmann reflects on the possibility of extraterrestrial life from a missiological perspective.[39] He argues that exotheology includes a dialogical and ecumenical framework, a future orientation, and a context of hope; it also provides new models for exomissiology. His approach insists that exotheology is important because it has a positive impact on the Christian Church here on earth.

Both exobiology and exotheology will remain theoretical and speculative unless (or until) contact with extraterrestrials is established. What UFO religions do is take for granted that intelligent life exists in our solar system and elsewhere, that such life has been involved in human history from the beginning, and that communication with chosen

individuals has occurred and is still taking place. While they can be seen as attempts to harmonize religion and science and to incorporate modern scientific discoveries into a revised religious world view, their major tenets are beyond (empirical) scientific investigation and verification. Moreover, one main belief common to UFO religions, namely, that the solution for many current human problems will come only from alien intervention, is not presently open to scientific experimentation and confirmation. They are thus unlikely to attract a large number of followers. They will remain, however, an interesting development in the religious experience of humankind and an example of human creativity in a changing world. Their presence will mostly likely be part of the myriad religious scene for many years to come.

ENDNOTES

[1] *The Gods Have Landed: New Religions from Other Worlds*, ed. James R. Lewis (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1995).

[2] When, in February 2005, I updated the "Chen Tao" profile for the Religious Movements Homepage Project, <www.religiousmovements.org/nrms/chentao.html>, I could not find any reports on the group after 1999. Then, the indication was that a small remnant of the group was in New York City, involved in social work, running a counseling and healing center. The most recent update on the group was made in 2004 by Ryan J. Cook and can be found at <www.cesnur.org/testi/Chen.htm>, but contains no data prior to 1999. Chen Tao's own Web site can no longer be accessed online, and a search conducted in April 2006 did not bring to light any new information.

[3] At one point, Raëlians explain the relationship between the Raëlian Movement and Clonaid as follows: "The Raelian Movement is a completely separate organisation from Clonaid. Clonaid is a project name (not a company) and is run by one Raëlian by the name of Dr. Brigitte Boisselier. Neither Raël nor the Raëlian Movement fund or have any involvement in Clonaid apart from moral support of cloning technologies" <www.rael.org/e107_plugins/faq/faq.php?cat.1.5>, accessed 26 February 2006—though I could not find this quote when I accessed the page again in late May 2006. The Raëlian Movement, however, admits that the Clonaid program was set up by Raël; see <www.rael.org/download.php?view.2>, accessed 20 June 2006, a fact acknowledged by Dr. Bosselier on Clonaid's own Web site, "Clonaid.com: Pioneers in Human Cloning" (<www.clonaid.com/news.php?1>, accessed 20 June 2006).

[4] See <www.aetherius.org/index.html>, accessed 3 January 2005. An early 2006 revision of this page states that the Society "is a spiritual organization comprised of people dedicated to help, heal and uplift humanity through spiritual action" (<www.aetherius.org/index.cfm?app=content&SectionID=28&PageID=1>, accessed 23 January 2006).

[5] See <www.unarius.org/start.html>, accessed 3 January 2005.

[6] See John A. Saliba, "Religious Dimensions of UFO Phenomena," in Lewis, ed., *The Gods Have Landed*, 15–64.

[7] See Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996). Originally Smart listed only five dimensions of religion; see Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind* (New York: Scribner, 1969).

[8] See, for example, Michael Molloy, *Experiencing the World's Religions: Tradition, Challenge, and Change*, 3rd. ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 7.

[9] In 2004, for example, Raëlians celebrated the "Year of Atheism"; see <www.thereisnogod.info/English/Intro.php>, accessed 3 January 2006.

[10] See, for example, Erich von Däniken, *Chariots of God? Unsolved Mysteries of the Past* (New York: Putnam, 1970). For a short description of von Däniken's theory of the origin of the human species, see John Robertson Allan, *The Gospel According to Science Fiction: God Was an Ancient Astronaut, Wasn't He?* (Milford, Mich.: Quill Publications, 1975), 22.

[11] Max Weber, *A Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. A. R. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), 363–73.

[12] See Christopher Partridge, "Alien Demonology: The Christian Roots of the Malevolent Extraterrestrial in UFO Religions and Abduction Spiritualities," *Religion* 34 (2004): 163–89. See also my essay, "Religious Dimensions of UFO Phenomena," in *The Gods Have Landed*, 32–41, in which I describe the various types of Christian interpretations of UFOs.

[13] Other UFO religions, based elsewhere, are also active. One of the largest of these is probably the "Cosmic People of Light Powers," also known as "The Universe People" (<www.universe-people.com/english/default.htm>). This UFO religion is led by Ivo A. Benda from the Slovac Republic. It boasts a Web site containing five thousand pages of text translated into twenty languages. Another group, "Fiat Lux," led by Uriella, is a small, German UFO religion. It does not have a Web site, because its members believe that the letters "www," which are part of an Internet address, represent the number "666," often identified in some Christian circles as the sign of the Antichrist. A short article on Fiat Lux, by Andreas Grünschloss, can be found at (<wwwuser.gwdg.de/~agruens/UFO/fiatlux.html>, accessed 16 May 2006).

[14] See <www.religiousmovements.org/nrms/heavensgate_mirror/index.html>, accessed 10 March 2006. Besides statements of the group's purpose and mission, this site reproduces the book *How and When Heaven's Gate May Be Entered*. The Heaven's Gate Web site is also mirrored at <www.wave.net/upg/gate>, accessed 10 March 2006.

[15] See <www.aquarianconcepts.org/>, accessed 5 April 2006.

[16] Baptism, or transmission, is the movement's initiation ritual during which Raël or one of his guides who, after Raël, are at the top of the movement's hierarchical structure, "dips his or her hands in a bowl of water and holds the initiate's head" (Palmer, *Aliens Adored*, 59). This ritual expresses the initiate's formal recognition of the Elohim as the creators.

[17] The Clonaid Web site states that there are 60,000 Raëlians in almost 100 countries.

[18] <www.aetherius.org/index.cfm?app=content&SectionID=39&PageID=95>, accessed 10 May 2006.

[19] For some of Palmer's studies see "Women as Playmate in the Raëlian Movement: Power and Pantagamy in a New Religion," *Syzygy: Journal of Alternative Religion and Culture* 1, no.3 (1992): 227–45; "The Raëlian Movement," in *New Religions in the New Europe*, ed. Robert Towler (Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 1995), 194–210; "Women in the Raëlian Movement: New Religious Experiments in Gender and Authority," in Lewis, ed., *The Gods Have Landed*, 105–136; "The Raëlians Are Coming: The Future of a New UFO Religion," in Madeleine Cousineau, ed., *Religion in a Changing World: Comparative Studies in Sociology*, ed. Madeleine Cousineau (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), 139–46; *I Raëliani* (Turin, Italy: Elledici, 2000); and Bryan Sentes and Susan Palmer, "Presume Immanent: The Raëlians, UFO Religions, and the Postmodern Condition," *Nova Religio* 4, no. 1 (2000): 86–105. For a more recent essay, see "The Raëlian Movement: Concocting Controversy, Seeking Social Legitimacy," in *Controversial Religious Movements*, ed. James R. Lewis and Jesper Aagaard Petersen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 371–85.

[20] The interpretation of "Elohim" and "sons of Gods" as referring respectively to aliens from other planets and to the offspring of sexual unions between aliens and human beings is not found in biblical scholarship. See, for example, *The Jerusalem Bible* (Garden City, NH: Doubleday and Co., 1966), 21, n. 6a; and Martin Rose, "Names of God in the Old Testament," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 4, 1007.

[21] See Diana Tumminia, "How Prophecy Never Fails: Interpretative Reason in a Flying-Saucer Group," *Sociology of Religion* 59 no. 2 (1998), 157–70; "In the Dreamtime of the Saucer People: Sense-Making and Interpretative Boundaries in a Contactee Group," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 31 (2002), 675–705; Diana Tumminia and R. George Kilpatrick, "Unarius: Emergent Aspects of an American Flying Saucer Group," in Lewis, ed., *The Gods Have Landed*, 85–100; and R. George Kilpatrick, and Diana Tumminia, "California Space Goddess: The Mystagogue in a Flying Saucer Cult," in *Twentieth-Century Religious Movements in New-Weberian Perspective*, ed. William H. Swatos (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 299–311. Although "Unarians" would seem to be the way to spell this, Tumminia points out that members of the group insist that the correct spelling is "Unariuns."

[22] See Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise on the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Penguin Books, 1966).

[23] This essay was previously published in the *Sociology of Religion* 59 no.2 (1998): 157–70.

[24] For an excellent discussion of the problems involved in her ethnographic work with the Unariuns, see Tumminia, "In the Dreamtime of the Saucer People."

[25] See Bryan R. Wilson, *The Social Dimensions of Sectarianism: New Religious Movements in Contemporary Society* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), esp. 267–88.

[26] This essay was originally published in the electronic journal, *The Marburg Journal of Religion* 4 no. 2., and can be accessed at <http://web.uni-marburg.de/religionswissenschaft/journal/mjr/saliba.html>.The earliest study of the Aetherius Society is Roy Wallis, "The Aetherius Society: A Case Study in the Formation of a Mystagogue Congregation," *Sociological Review* 22 (1974), 27–44.

[27] Most of Balch and Taylor's publications are listed in the Heaven's Gate profile on the Religious Movements Homepage, <www.religiousmovements.org/nrms/hgprofile.html>, which I updated in 2005.

[28] For some of the classical studies of these movements, see Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of "Cargo Cults" in Melanesia* (London: MacGibbon, 1957); and Kenelm Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth: A Study of Millenarian Activities* (London: Methuen, 1960). For more recent studies see G. W. Trompf, *Cargo Cults and Millenarian Movements* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1990); and Jebens Holger, ed., *Cargo, Cult, and Culture Critique* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).

[29] Mikael Rothstein, *I Culti dei Dischi Volanti* (Turin, Italy: Elledici, 1999), 27.

[30] Diana Tumminia and James R. Lewis, eds., *Alien Worlds: The Social and Religious Dimensions of UFO Phenomena*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, forthcoming).

[31] Many scientists are involved in exploring the question of whether extraterrestrial life exists. The most well-known project devoted to this is the "Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence" (SETI). On its Web site, SETI encourages lay people to participate in the search using their personal home computers. See <http://setiathome.berkeley.edu>, accessed 25 May 2006.

[32] Stephen J. Dick, ed., *Many Worlds: The New Universe, Extraterrestrial Life, and the Theological Implications* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2000). See also his two books, *Life on Other Worlds: The Twentieth Century Extraterrestrial Life Debate* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and *Extraterrestrial Life and Our World View at the Turn of the Millennium* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institute Libraries, 2000).

[33] See, for example, John M. Aguiar, "A Biologist's View of Life Out There," *Mercury* (San Francisco, Calif.) 28 no. 2 (1999): 20–25; Charles Siebert, "The Genesis Project," *New York Times* (26 September 2004): sec. 6, 51–55; Martin Rees, "Our Greatest Quest," *New Scientist* 179, no. 2403 (12 July 2003): 25–27; and Oliver Sacks, "Anybody Out There?," *Natural History* 111, no. 9 (November 2002): 28–40.

[34] Peter D. Ward, *Life As We Know It: The NASA Search for (and Synthesis of) Alien Life* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2005), 141.

[35] Stephen J. Dick, *Plurality of Worlds: The Origins of the Extraterrestrial Life Debate from Democritus to Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); and Thomas F. O'Meara, "Christian Theology and Extraterrestrial Intelligent Life," *Theological Studies* 60 (1999), 3–30.

[36] Jack A. Jennings, "UFOs: The Next Theological Challenge?," *Christian Century* 95 no. 6 (22 February 1978): 184–89.

[37] John Haught, "Theology after Contact: Religion and Extraterrestrial Intelligent Life," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 950 (December 2001): 296. Haught, who teaches at Georgetown University, is well know for his work on theology and evolution. See, for example, his books, *God after Darwin: A Theology of Evolution*

(Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2000); and *Deeper than Darwin: The Prospect for Religion in an Age of Evolution* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2003).

[38] Haught, "Theology after Contact," 306.

[39] Hoffmann is the Director of Evangelism and Church Development for the Eurasia Conferences of the United Methodist Church. See his article "Exomissiology: The Launching of Exotheology," *Dialogue: A Journal of Theology* 43 (2004): 324–37.