

At the Nexus of Science and Religion: UFO Religions

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Abstract

The modern period has witnessed a rise of religious interest in extraterrestrial life and visitations, which although dating back to the 18th century, culminated during the 20th century in the emergence of the ‘UFO religions’. This article highlights the manner in which the founders and members of unidentified flying object (UFO) religions have sought to operate at the nexus of science and religion in the modern world. The article first considers definitional questions and explains the origin of the concept of UFOs, ufology, and UFO religions. The article then traces the history of the development and rise of several of these religions, providing case studies of the major UFO religions and religious movements. Finally, the article considers recent scholarship and research issues involving UFO religions.

1. Definitional Questions

According to one common definitional approach, religions ask questions and offer answers about the nature of humanity, the Earth, and the universe beyond our immediate comprehension, often focusing on the heavens and other non-human realms (Pals 1996, pp. 11–2). Interestingly, non-religious belief systems predicated on ideas about unidentified flying objects (UFOs) and extraterrestrials (ETs) ask similar questions and come to strikingly similar conclusions. Most religious individuals believe in a heaven, superhuman angels and demons, and a universe of existence beyond normal human comprehension. People who believe in the existence of UFOs and their visitation of Earth similarly insist on the existence of life in the heavens, often in the form of powerful superhuman ETs, either good (angelic) or bad (demonic), and a cosmos filled with forces beyond humanity’s currently limited comprehension. Both religious people and believers in UFOs make specific postulations about the nature of humanity and its relation to the broader universe. UFO religions combine these two sorts of analogous belief systems, merging ideas about UFOs and ETs into religious frameworks that answer questions about myth, ritual, purpose, and salvation, as well as the nature of life on other planets and visitations by ETs.

By virtue of their very nature, UFO religions combine beliefs in UFOs and alien visitations with religious ideas. Yet UFO religions do something else as well: they operate at a hazy boundary between religion, science, pseudoscience, and science fiction – what I call the nexus of science and religion. I am not the first scholar to envision the religious engagement with UFOs as somehow related to science. Carl Jung famously wrote of UFOs as ‘technological angels’, explaining as early as 1958 that believers in UFOs transposed religious ideas into new, modern, scientific forms (Jung, pp. 18–23). He specifically argued that UFOs symbolized the divine, but were scientific manifestations of the divine archetype (Segal 2003, pp. 314–28). John A. Saliba has similarly posited that UFO religions adopt aspects of scientific thinking, bringing religion and science together into a new synthesis. He writes, “the UFO worldview unites, to some degree, religious and scientific views of the origin of the human race” (Saliba 1995, p. 50). By contrast,

Christopher Partridge draws attention to the disjuncture between UFO religions and science, explaining that “whilst many of their beliefs can be described as ‘physicalist,’ the conventional meaning of the word ‘science’ is almost absent” (2003b, p. 22).

Part of my argument here is that UFO religions are not in fact purely scientific, but neither is science absent from their worldviews. In fact, being ‘scientific’ – however members of UFO religions define that term – is often central to the self-understanding of the adherents of UFO religions. Yet their understandings of science are fluid, changing, and seldom follow rigorous academic definitions of the term. UFO religions often combine elements of science fiction, pseudoscience, and what professional scientists would recognize as academic science. UFO religions engage in a creative act of religious syncretism, drawing from multiple sources as they create complex systems of beliefs and practice at the nexus of science and religion.

2. *UFOs, Flying Saucers, and ETs*

Though people have seen unidentified objects in the sky for time immemorial, the concept of the UFO – or, alternatively, ‘flying saucer’ – is a new one, emerging in the United States of America during the Cold War. A reported sighting of such an extraterrestrial craft by pilot Kenneth Arnold in 1947 led to the coining of the term ‘flying saucer’, based on Arnold’s description of the craft. The United States Air Force introduced the term UFO in 1952, intending for it to have a broader meaning of any unusual and unidentifiable flying object, including terrestrially made objects as well as possibly extraterrestrial ones.

Following Arnold’s first sighting of a UFO on June 24, 1947 near Mount Rainier, Washington, thousands of individuals in the United States and abroad began reporting similar sightings. Less than a month later, in July 1947, news broke of the recovery of a crashed UFO in Roswell, New Mexico, by the United States Air Force. Though military and government officials insisted that the UFO had a mundane terrestrial origin, media and popular culture accounts spread stories of an extraterrestrial origin of the crashed craft. Reports of sightings, crashes, and even recovery of extraterrestrial remains increased throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Government and academic probes into the UFO sightings found no credible scientific evidence existed for their existence, a finding that pushed UFO believers into fringe subcultures rather than close the book on the question of UFOs. As Michael Barkun has argued, belief in UFOs and ETs became a form of stigmatized knowledge, beliefs that cast the believer outside the mainstream into a realm of alternative culture and deviance. Scholars call the alternative subculture centering on UFOs ‘ufology’, and having become sensitized to this alternative subculture, some believers in UFOs became involved in alternative religions as well. In many cases, they introduced belief in UFOs into these alternative religions (Barkun 2003, pp. 79–97). These new religions built upon decades – and in some cases, centuries – of earlier religious thought involving extraterrestrial life and visitation, yielding dozens of UFO religions within 30 years of Arnold’s sighting.

3. *Prehistory of UFO Religions*

People have mused about the possibility of extraterrestrial life long before Kenneth Arnold’s sighting of a UFO. In the wake of Galileo’s astronomical developments in the 17th century, debate over the ‘plurality of worlds’ and its theological implications became a hot topic among scientists, theologians, and other literate Europeans. Ronald L.

Numbers has argued that these 17th- and 18th-century scientific debates were ‘suffused with religious overtones’, including the place of ETs in the drama of salvation, and the possibility of heaven and hell physically located in extraterrestrial space (2007, p. 26). This era witnessed a growing professional divide between scientists and clergy, but discussions of UFOs brought both communities of thought together. Such intellectual foment lay the groundwork for the UFO religions that would follow hundreds of years later.

The scientist and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) established one of the first religious movements to place the idea of extraterrestrial life at the center of its theological identity. An accomplished chemist and metallurgist, Swedenborg’s turn to mysticism led to his treatise, *De Telluribus in Mundo Nostro Solari*, usually translated as *Earths in the Universe* (1758). The book detailed Swedenborg’s visitation of Mercury, Jupiter, Mars, Saturn, and Venus, his interactions with their inhabitants, and the religious messages that these ETs offered to Earth. Swedenborg indicated that these ETs exemplified utopian social, scientific, and religious systems, and insisted that humanity ought to follow in their example. While Swedenborg inverted the 20th-century visitation pattern of UFO religions – he visited the alien worlds, rather than receive alien visitors here on Earth – the book serves as a forerunner in UFO religious thought, setting the pattern of envisioning extraterrestrial life as a utopian example of religious, social, and scientific harmony. Several of the founders of today’s UFO religions were also influenced by Swedenborg, whose work had filtered through Spiritualism and then the New Age movement.

The other major source of UFO religion prior to the Arnold UFO sightings is Theosophy and the broader Theosophical worldview, especially present today in such UFO groups as the ‘I AM’ religious movement and the Church Universal and Triumphant. Founded by Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) in 1875, the Theosophical Society dedicates itself to transcending the division between science, esotericism, and the world religions, bringing them together within a system of occult scientific and religious research, study, and practice (Ellwood 2006, pp. 48–66). Like the UFO religions that would follow in the 20th century, the turn of the century Theosophical Society operated at the nexus of religion and science. Key to Theosophy was Blavatsky’s concept of masters, great religious teachers that humans could access through occult means. Among these masters were ETs, specifically Venusians. Although Blavatsky was sometimes vague and contradictory, she indicated that these Venusian ‘Lords of the Flame’ occupied the highest place on the celestial hierarchy of masters, and served as elite spiritual instructors for humanity (Partridge 2003b, pp. 8–10). Like Swedenborg, Theosophists offered ETs as exemplars of religious, social, and scientific utopianism, insisting that their teachings would usher an era of peace, tranquility, and enlightenment to Earth. Continuing into the post-Arnold era, the Theosophical offshoot movements I AM – founded by Guy Ballard (1878–1939) – and the Church Universal and Triumphant, formerly Summit Lighthouse – led by Mark Prophet (1918–1973) and Elizabeth Clare Prophet (1939–2009) – would highlight these extraterrestrial masters and restructure the Theosophical heritage around contact with such ETs.

4. UFO Religions in the Post-Arnold Era

Kenneth Arnold’s UFO sighting, the claimed Roswell crash, and the numerous UFO sightings that followed in the next decade led to the birth and development of several notable UFO religions. This new breed of UFO religions responded to the Arnold sighting, and with it the new UFO subculture that was contemporaneously emerging. They

explained why aliens were visiting Earth, what the UFOs really were, and what the ETs wanted. But they did so in an explicitly religious manner, and they stressed the religious message that the ETs brought. Further, these new UFO religions developed their religious worldviews in the cultural climate of the 1950s, and with it the new atomic science and in the shadow of the Bomb.

Of the founders of these new UFO religion, one of the earliest is the occultist and spiritual entrepreneur George Adamski (1891–1965), whose 1953 book co-authored with Desmond Leslie, *The Flying Saucers Have Landed* recounted Adamski's encounter with the 'Space Brothers', human-looking ETs from Venus who had traveled to Earth using flying saucers in order to dispense a message of occult wisdom. Adamski explained that the Space Brothers lived by a higher spiritual law of self-development, and that through repeated reincarnations, all beings could evolve into a higher consciousness. Importantly, Adamski insisted that the Venusians' technology required spiritual awareness as well, and that without such spiritual development, technology and science were valueless. While one might read this as a critique of science and technology, in fact Adamski offered a new model of a science fused with religion. The Space Brothers' UFOs operated using spiritual machinery, and only such a fusion of religion and science allowed them to visit other planets. Adamski's readers in the United States, Australia, and New Zealand founded several quasi-religious movements dedicated to studying and promulgating the Venusian wisdom given to Adamski, but the groups were short lived and factionalized. Few of the groups survived after several scientific probes disproved Adamski's statements on Lunar and Martian geography (Ellwood 1995, pp. 177–83).

Far more long lasting than the Adamski movements, the Aetherius Society, founded in 1954 by English spiritual seeker George King (1919–1997), focused on the message given to King by spiritually and technologically advanced Venusians and Martians, most notably the ETs calling themselves Aetherius and Mars Sector 6. Unlike Adamski and some of the other contactees who claimed that UFOs physically visited them, King proclaimed that he visited several UFOs during the 1950s using entirely psychic means, akin to Swedenborg. Like Adamski's Venusians, King's ETs brought a message of peace and spiritual awareness, calling on humanity 'to learn the Divine Law' and 'the framework of its lasting Truth' (King 1963, p. 19). The Divine Law was both pacifistic and anti-technological. Specifically, it called for humanity to eschew atomic weapons and nuclear warmongering, a serious issue in the 1950s.

The Aetherius Society teaches that the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter is all that remains of a planet once called Maldek that had annihilated itself through nuclear war. Previous to their atomic self-destruction the planet had been a technological and scientific utopia, but its inhabitants lacked spiritual self-development and therefore were unable to control their technology. A similar pattern had repeated on Earth among the mythic ancient civilizations of Lemuria and Atlantis, and both civilizations suffered the consequences. Only the merciful interference of the Martian and Venusian ETs prevented the nuclear warmongering of Lemuria and Atlantis from engulfing the rest of Earth.

With this as the backdrop, the Aetherius Society offered a message specifically tuned to the tense environment of Cold War nuclear brinkmanship. Unless humanity turned away from its path of atomic destruction, the same fate awaited it. King's Venusians and Martians sometimes implied that this decision was collective and social, and at other times individual and spiritual. Regardless, Aetherius's position was clear: nuclear technology represented a threat, and while some technologies prove beneficent – for example, the extraterrestrial UFO called 'Third Satellite', which hovered 1550 miles above Earth and served as a spiritual-technological base for extraterrestrial activity on Earth – science and

technology unmitigated by spiritual development would lead only to destruction. The theology of the Aetherius Society must be read as a Cold War response the birth of the atomic age, forged at the nexus of science and religion.

Founded the same year as Aetherius, the Unarius Academy of Science, led by Ernest L. Norman (1904–1971) and Ruth E. Norman (1900–1993), similarly claims to represent the interest of benevolent space aliens as psychically transmitted to humanity. Like Aetherius, Unarius did not proclaim that a UFO had physically visited its founders, but it did insist that such crafts would visit the Earth in the near future. The group even purchased land in California to build a landing strip for such extraterrestrial visitors. Members of the Unarius Academy of Science believe that these ETs – identified as the ‘Space Brothers’, like Adamski’s ETs – offered spiritual teachings intended to guarantee humans a fortunate rebirth on distant utopian planets, including Venus, Eros, Hermes, Orion, Muse, Elysium, the Pleiades, and Unarius, the headquarters of an interplanetary confederacy and source of the group’s name. Like Aetherius, Unarius identified the atomic age as one fraught with change, but unlike the apocalyptic warnings of Aetherius, Unarius looked to the new atomic science as a source of knowledge and potential. Following the physical arrival of the Space Brothers onboard their UFOs, the ETs would enable a new golden age of science, spirituality, technology, and tranquility. They would cure all diseases, social ills, and psychic wrongs, and teach humanity the cosmic truths that would allow Earthlings to join the planetary confederacy of Unarius. The Space Brothers would utilize spiritual technology such as ‘psychic anatomy viewer’ to enact such changes. The Normans did not elucidate how this viewer operated, but did specify that the Space Brothers used technological (rather than magical or supernatural) means to enact the new golden age.

Unarius’s founders had long operated at the nexus of science and religion. Previous to founding Unarius the Normans had been psychics, and frequently channeled scientists Michael Faraday (1791–1867) and Nikola Tesla (1856–1943), who offered occult interpretations of modern scientific thought, as well as channeling Swedenborg himself, the progenitor of today’s UFO religions. After the founding of the group, Ruth Norman authored a text called *Interdimensional Physics*, which although containing very little of what secular scientists would call physics, employed scientific-sounding terms and concepts in order to express religious sentiments. A similar pattern repeats in Ruth Norman’s other texts and teachings. Although one might follow James R. Lewis in reading such a use of science as a legitimating strategy, in the case of Unarius the founder’s legitimacy emerged from their self-declared spiritual gifts, not the content of their messages (Lewis 2003). Science and technology held central places in the theology of Unarius because the founders and adherents of the movement accepted the very modern premise that science and technology were the basis of correct knowledge and most efficacious means of accomplishing individual and social goals. But as a religious group with psychic and occult influences, the movement’s ‘science’ and ‘technology’ appeared very different than what one would find in a university curriculum. Unarius’s idea of science is non-empirical and non-physical, encompassing the transmigration of souls, psychic healing, and telepathy.

Other UFO religions also emerged in the 1950s, many of them ephemeral or exceedingly small. In some cases, psychics or channelers simply added ETs to a list of other superhuman beings with which they communed. Latter-day Theosophical movements such as I AM and the Church Universal and Triumphant updated the existing Theosophical approach to UFOs by referencing contemporary visitations by flying saucers. A quasi-religious subculture of UFO contactees also emerged, individuals who claimed direct experiences with UFOs or ETs, but did not form actual religious movements

around themselves. As Brenda Denzler has explained, many of these self-proclaimed contactees offered specific religious messages, often tied to New Age spiritualities (2001, pp. 136–40). However many others contactees and ufologists used their belief in UFOs and ETs to transform religion into a new, quasi-scientific entity. Following the lead of amateur historians such as Erich von Däniken (b. 1935), they proclaimed that religious writings and teachings merely recorded ancient UFO sightings and encounters in language appropriate to their cultural and historical context. Such contactees called for removing the supernaturalist and miraculous elements from such religious teachings, and ensuring that the religious teachings that remain fit within a scientific technological modern worldview. As several scholars have argued, such UFO quasi-religions function as a form of modern naturalizing religion (Denzler, pp. 155–9; Zeller 2010, pp. 117–20). Neither fully religion nor fully science, the worldview of UFO contactees falls in the hazy border at the nexus of the two.

5. UFO Religions in the Late 20th Century and Beyond

Recent UFO religions have begun to move beyond concerns with atomic weaponry and nuclear devastation, in keeping with contemporary cultural developments. The Christian resurgence has led to a number of groups fusing Christian and Theosophical approaches to UFOs, most notably Heaven's Gate, as well as Christian groups envisioning ETs as demonic forces, such as the short-lived Alien Resistance Headquarters organization. Greater cultural sensitivity to ecological issues and the series of environmental disasters and problems throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, have led to newer UFO groups incorporating environmental messages into their religious systems.

Of the recent UFO groups, none are more famous than the Raelian movement (sometimes called the Raelian Church) and Heaven's Gate. Both groups emerged in the 1970s, and combined belief in UFOs and extraterrestrial visitation with traditional Christian teachings. In fact, the two groups read the Christian Bible with reference to what I call an 'extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutic', meaning an interpretive framework that assumes life on other planets, visitation from such life, and the recording of those encounters in the Bible (Zeller 2011). Most certainly religions, the founders and proponents of UFO groups such as the Raelians and Heaven's Gate attempted to reread scripture in keeping with what they regarded as modern scientific mores.

The Raelian movement, founded in 1974 by Claude Raël, née Claude Vorilhon (b.1946), is predicated on its founder's experience of encountering a UFO in the French countryside in December 1973, and his visit to the extraterrestrial planet of the Elohim 3 years later. Like the earlier UFO religions, the Raelian movement proclaims that it offers the true message of the origin of life on Earth, its purpose, and its future. As a guest of the extraterrestrial Elohim, Raël learned that the Bible records in metaphoric language the story of the creation of the human race by Elohim master scientists (in Hebrew, Elohim is a name for God, and is used in the Genesis creation story). Notably, the Elohim are not spiritual beings, but corporeal, biological ETs gifted with brilliant minds and technological know-how. Their science has enabled them to not only travel the cosmos, but create and manage life on planets such as Earth, and grant effective immortality through advanced cloning science.

The Raelian movement is strongest in the francophone world, but has made inroads in anglophone Canada, the United States, and Israel as well. Its members believe that the Elohim will return to Earth once the human species has proven its science and technology adept enough, and has accepted the Elohim as our creators and guides. Science, as

scholar of the Raelian movement Susan J. Palmer has explained, is absolutely central to the movement's self-understanding. The group combines science and religion, trying to make religion more scientific and science more religious. Palmer explains that Raël teaches "a 'scientific', 'myth-as-fact' interpretation of the stories of the Bible. He also 'spiritualizes' science and technology and evokes a feeling of awe and reverence around the power of science" (Palmer 2004, p. 23). Stripping supernaturalistic elements from the Bible but investing science with a salvific transcendent value, the Raelian movement attempts to bring the two together.

One must read the Raelian movement as a continuation of a long process of demythologization of Christianity in the wake of the advent of modernity. Early Protestant reformers such as Luther, Calvin, and Knox pushed the 'age of miracles' back to the distant past, seeking to make the present a realm of complete naturalism (Weber 1930, pp. 98–128). Later radical religious reformers went even further, interpreting the biblical miracles as mere symbols or metaphors. In his famous Bible, Thomas Jefferson even excised the supernatural elements from the New Testament text, leaving only the moral teachings of Jesus. The Raelian movement demonstrates the continued desire to maintain a link to the religious past in the scientific present.

While the Raelian movement has attracted the most attention in the francophone world, the manner by which the American UFO group Heaven's Gate ended its existence has led to its becoming the most famous UFO religion in the late 20th century. The 1997 mass suicide of its 39 members (followed by two additional members shortly thereafter) ended the history of Heaven's Gate, but during its early existence it was one of the fastest growing UFO groups in the United States. Founded by Marshall Herff Applewhite (1932–1997) and Bonnie Lu Nettles (1928–1985) in 1972, the founders and members of Heaven's Gate read the Christian scriptures through their firm commitment to the existence of ETs and UFO visitations, as well as a broader New Age spiritual search (Zeller 2006).

Unlike Raël's movement, the founders of Heaven's Gate did not claim to have experienced a close encounter with a UFO. Rather, they claimed to actually be space aliens, benevolent ETs sojourning on Earth to bring a message of individual salvation and self-transformation. Applewhite and Nettles – who used a variety of religious names during their tenure, eventually culminating in Ti (Nettles) and Do (Applewhite) – claimed their species had created life on Earth, and used the planet as a garden in which to grow new recruits for the 'Next Level', what secular or scientific humans call outer space, and religious people know as heaven. Humans who met the approval of the Next Level could journey onboard UFOs to this extraterrestrial realm, where they would live forever as perfected alien beings and members of a unified crew dedicated to the peaceful maintenance of the universe. Analogous to the Christian concept of heaven, the Next Level functioned as the movement's understanding of salvation.

Early in Heaven's Gate's history its leaders maintained that the UFOs would enter Earth's atmosphere and pick up the new human recruits, but at the end of the movement's existence the group insisted on leaving behind the human body through suicide as a necessary condition for journeying to the Next Level. Yet throughout, UFOs served as the technological means of salvation, akin to the ritual means of salvation in sacramental Christianity. While not equivalent to salvation itself, encountering and boarding a UFO led one to the eventual goal of self-transformation and near-apotheosis in the heavens. To guarantee admission to the UFO, potential recruits had to accept the teachings of Applewhite and Nettles and live as a single-minded monastic crew while still in their Earthly bodies, abstaining from the pleasures of this world.

Like the Raelian Church and the earlier UFO religions, Heaven's Gate also operated at the nexus of science and religion. In the case of Heaven's Gate, the group declared itself a science rather than a religion, and insisted that it operated within the realm of scientific naturalism and empiricism. While many of its truth claims fell outside the purvey of normative science, and its insistence of faith in the group's claims and leaders certainly challenged the notion of empiricism, the group's self-understanding shows a movement that sought not only the legitimacy of science, but the mantle of modernity, authenticity, and rationality that science possesses in the modern world. Like the Raelians, the movement's members stripped the Bible of all supernaturalism, and rejected the very notion of miracles. They believed instead in the salvific role of extraterrestrial technology. The group's leaders and members even called religion 'nonsense' and 'myth', revealing to what extent the adherents of Heaven's Gate self-defined themselves as scientific. While Heaven's Gate was clearly not a science in any academic sense, it did exist at the fuzzy boundary between science, pseudoscience, and religion.

6. Recent Scholarship and Research Issues Involving UFO Religions

Several new books and collections on UFO religions have appeared in the past few years, notably Dianna G. Tumminia's *Alien Worlds* (2007), Christopher Partridge's anthology *UFO Religions* (2003a), and Brenda Denzler's *The Lure of the Edge* (2001), as well as a new collection of essays on UFO religions edited by Paul Brian Thomas in *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* (2010). This is in addition to case studies on specific UFO religions, such as those authored by Palmer (2004) on the Raelians or myself on Heaven's Gate (Zeller 2010). Though these scholars take a variety of approaches – especially the contributors to the anthologies – all agree that UFO religions respond to modernity, and with it its foci on science, technology, and rationalism. One might read this research as merely following in the footsteps of Jung, whose seminal work has certainly informed all subsequent scholarship. But recent studies move beyond envisioning UFOs as merely 'technological angels', psychical projections of a divine archetype into the realms of science, to show how religion, science, technology, pseudoscience, and quasi-religion all blend. I have argued here that UFO religions operate at the nexus of these social forces. Each UFO religion – like all other religions – is obviously unique and situates itself differently than the others. But all UFO religions play with the innate sympathies between religious and ufological beliefs, namely the ideas of interacting with nonhuman and superhuman entities, answering questions about the nature of human life and what is beyond our planet, and ritualizing this worldview through religious practice. Clearly the topic of UFO religions continues to fascinate scholars as well as the public.

Short Biography

Benjamin E. Zeller researches religion in America, focusing on religious currents that are new or alternative, including new religions, the religious engagement with science, and the quasi-religious relationship people have with food. His book, *Prophets and Protons: New Religious Movements and Science in Late Twentieth-Century America* (NYU Press, 2010) considers how three new religious movements engaged science and what they reveal of broader culture. Zeller serves as Assistant Professor of Religious Studies, Coordinator of the Religion and Philosophy Major, and Director of the Honors Program at Brevard College, a private liberal arts college in North Carolina's Appalachian mountains.

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