



# Outer space, out of mind

Talk of UFOs brings out the worst in  
atheists and cowardly academics

Let us start with an odd but just possibly significant bit of trivia. When the conversation turns to the subject of extra-terrestrial figures, whether it takes the form of ridiculing the very idea of such things or whether they are truly believed in — even to a claim that one of the party has actually seen such a figure — there is complete agreement that the Things, real or chimerical, are always little green men.

Why little, why green and why men? I do not know. For a moment I thought the idea came from the truly green little man in the shape of E.T., but a moment's thought showed that the idea had been deeply embedded in our culture long before E.T. arrived, and I leave the puzzle where it was born — if, that is, I can discover who started the thing.

Now, I have repeatedly asked why the notion of creatures from another planet should be treated with mirth and contempt, though we know from the scientists that there are countless billions of other worlds, some of these being thousands of times bigger than the size of our speck in the universe, and thousands of degrees hotter to boot. If you just think for a moment about those vast numbers of other worlds you should be rocking with laughter if anyone suggests that the universe is peopled only by us. How we get in touch with them is another story, but no doubt in the course of the centuries we shall find a way to shake their little green hands.

But that terror — for terror it truly is for those who cannot accept that our world and its inhabitants may be duplicated millions of times over — holds a far greater terror. It is the terror of believing that the universe is not random, and that there is a hand which guides us. And we call the hand God.

Ah, but when the word "God" is spoken in the hearing of Dr Richard Dawkins, something like hysteria breaks out. Here is a scientist of very great knowledge and understanding, but the very thought of God, indeed the very word, puts him in such great rage and fear that he all but foams at the mouth.

I do not exaggerate. When a man with Dr Dawkins's mind and knowledge sinks to such childish vulgarity as he is capable of, the only explanation must be that he is not as certain of himself as he would like us to think. He says of a certain

Christian polemicist that "he can have no independent mind, because he is told what to think by an elderly Pole [viz, the Pope] who has no qualifications and is moreover a dangerous world-damaging dictator. What an ignominious, contemptible, retarded basis for holding the deepest beliefs of ones life." And to top it, Dr Dawkins says that theology is no longer a respectable subject for universities to teach. Mind, Dr Dawkins is sufficiently silly to insist that he is not an agnostic but an atheist; he knows, you see. But if you ask him where and how the universe came into being, he would be just as flummoxed as any of us, though he would pretend to understand it, so we might as well say right out, "God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform,"

which at least is couched in beautiful language, which is more than can be said for Dr Dawkins's.

But, though you may think otherwise, I did not come here to try to make Dr Dawkins burst with rage; actually, when I started out, Dr Dawkins was not even in my mind. I was, once again, shaking my head at people who cannot believe that there are other beings in other places in the universe. That, surely, is the clue to the argument over the little green men; if there are beings like us, but far, far ahead in wisdom, understanding, peace and love, we shall be shamed. The little green men, are, in our subconscious, there to make fun of the dangers.

But what, you ask, is the danger? After all there aren't little green men around, are there? No, but there is a much more powerful danger, and it is that I want to discuss.

It begins in America (where else?) and in Harvard (where else?) with Dr John Mack. This man is a very distinguished psychiatrist; he is a Pulitzer prizewinner, his papers are accepted by *The American Journal of Medicine* and he shared with one other such teacher the honour of founding the university's school of psychiatry. Nor does he confine

himself to his psychiatric work; he has written a biography of Lawrence of Arabia. But he has had to go through a disciplinary hearing, from which he has only just emerged. Moreover, it was touch and go whether he would be dismissed from his position. (William Langley had the story, and it was splashed in *The Sunday Telegraph*.)

Very well; what has he done? Has he harassed female students? Of course not. Has he been drunk on the lecture podium? Perish the thought. Were his pockets a-jingle when the petty-cash had just disappeared?

Ridiculous. Professor Mack's crime is to believe many of his patients when they say that they have been taken from their homes by space aliens and subsequently brought back to Earth.

Professor Mack is, of course, familiar with the sight of a patient lying on the couch, and pouring out his or her troubles or pains or even madnesses to him. But this is something very different; very different indeed:

... "Jerry", a 32-year-old Massachusetts clerical worker . . . believes she has been kidnapped more than 50 times since she was a toddler. Now married, with three children of her own, Jerry says she knows when the terror is about to begin from a ringing in her ears and a strange crackling energy that straightens her hair. "I am awakened by a tap," she says. "I feel paralysed but awake. They invade you entirely. Then they float you out."

We have four, and only four, responses. The first is that the "subject" is deluded or even insane. The second is that the doctor has deluded himself. The third is that the doctor is making money with a giant fraud. The fourth is that both the patients and the doctor are right.

Naturally, the other doctors and the Harvard high-ups instantly discarded the fourth response. All universities are cowardly, and the cowardice grows greater with the prestige of the university. Better, far better, to sack an eccentric professor

than to risk being laughed at. But there is a difficulty in sacking the prof: he broke no Harvard rule, and *a fortiori* no law. Nor does he want for friends, as witness Professor Alan Dershowitz:

John has been doing this work, quietly and diligently, for years. And the moment he gets any recognition for it, the university freaks out. The kangaroo court they have set up will damage Harvard's reputation more than anything John is ever likely to do.

Nervously, grudgingly and cowardly, the Harvard University kangaroo court let Professor Mack alone, and he continued with his work, a mere hundred thousand dollars lighter for legal fees and having wasted countless hours defending himself.

Now then. I am obviously in no position to adjudicate or even have an opinion on the story. Possibly, Professor Mack and his "patients" are mad, or have discovered a gigantic hole in the universe. Others would say that the prof has got very much the wrong end of all of the sticks in this business. And so on. But that brings me back to another academic, Dr Dawkins. What would he say if he were confronted with Professor Mack's dilemma? We already know that Dr Dawkins can throw a fit with the best of us; he might, having looked at the Mack business, gone pale and backed out of the room. But to do him credit, Dawkins is not one for backing out of anybody's room. A lurid picture can be seen through the mist. Prof Mack shows his materials to Doc Dawkins; Doc Dawkins examines the evidence, and announces that Prof Mack is — how should we put it? — a good few coupons short of a pop-up toaster. Trouble breaks out.

Perhaps both men would listen to me for a moment (I fear that Doc Dawkins will not listen to me, or perhaps anybody, whereas Prof Mack seems a most mild figure), because I think I have an answer. There is no chance that Doc Dawkins will have anything to do with God, whereas Prof Mack is clearly attuned to the sounds of mystery. Well then, have them change places for a week; Prof Mack will calm down Doc Dawkins, and Doc Dawkins will be so bemused that he will find himself muttering "God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform".

We can but try.

## Bernard Levin