

# UFO MYTHOLOGIES

## EXTRATERRESTRIAL COSMOLOGY AND INTERGALACTIC ESCHATOLOGY

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*The initial flying saucer mythology that arose in the 1950s and 1960s is characterized by explicitly religious and mystical narratives that describe contact with extraterrestrial savior beings. These beliefs emerged in the Cold War era, in response to widespread fears of nuclear apocalypse. This essay traces the origins and development of the early UFO mythos, and presents case studies of several well-known UFO religious groups, analyzing the mythic aspects of their belief systems with particular focus on apocalyptic and millennialist scenarios.*

Keywords: UFO religion, mythology, eschatology, millennialism, nuclear apocalypse, ancient astronauts

*Za mitologijo letečega krožnika, ki je nastala v 50. in 60. letih prejšnjega stoletja, so značilne eksplicitne religiozne in mistične pripovedi, ki opisujejo stik z nezemeljskimi rešitelji. Ta prepričanja so se pojavila v času hladne vojne kot odgovor na razširjene strahove pred jedrsko apokalipso. Esej sledi izvoru in razvoju zgodnjih mitov o NLP (neznanih letečih predmetih) in predstavlja študije primerov več znanih verskih skupin NLP, pri čemer analizira mitske vidike njihovih sistemov prepričanj s posebnim poudarkom na apokaliptičnih in milenijskih scenarijih.*

Keywords: religija NLP, mitologija, eshatologija, milenarizem, jedrska apokalipsa, starodavni astronauti

Popular beliefs and narratives about encounters with extraterrestrials have thrived in vernacular culture for more than sixty years. The concept of the flying saucer has emerged as one of the most evocative symbols in the world, a global icon imbued with mythological and folkloric significance. A synthesis of science and religion, beliefs about Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs) and interplanetary beings are imbued with an aura of alterity and numinous mystery, a manifestation of ultimate Otherness that offers alternative views of the self, the cosmos, and reality. The mythologies associated with UFOs are protean and shape-shifting, as are the aliens that have materialized in the extraterrestrial discourse over the years—ranging from cosmically-evolved guardians and interstellar messengers of salvation to agents of apocalypse, demonic reptilian invaders, and grey-skinned beings abducting humans for multifarious purposes.

Appearing at the dawn of the atomic age, initial beliefs about flying saucers quickly assumed religious meanings in response to the threat of nuclear annihilation and other societal crises, offering the promise of otherworldly deliverance. As the UFO movement broadened in the ensuing years, relatively obscure beliefs situating extraterrestrials (ETs) within an historical context also increased in popularity, with aliens viewed as ancient astronauts who seeded intelligent life on planet Earth, or who intervened throughout human history as enlightened ones guiding the development of civilizations and human progress. In contrast to these views, subsequent beliefs and narratives have cast aliens as amoral or malevolent creatures, whether engaged in sinister conspiracies, conducting abductions and

performing invasive ET-human hybridization experiments, or enacting a doomsday plan involving the destruction or enslavement of humanity.

Although many of those involved in the UFO community are interested primarily in the scientific and empirical study of UFOs, much of the vast and divergent lore about flying saucers and extraterrestrials nonetheless can be readily situated within the realms of mythology and religion. As various researchers have observed, such beliefs resemble previous religious traditions involving earthly origins and endings, otherworldly journeys, savior beings from the skies, angels and demons, culture heroes, accounts of heavenly ascent, and supernatural assault and kidnapping narratives.<sup>1</sup> In the words of religious studies scholar Christopher Partridge, “the modern sacralization of the extraterrestrial has been a central feature of UFO folklore from the outset” (Partridge, 2003b: 7). The ethnologist István Povedák observes that the UFO phenomenon is a “natural (but supernatural), integral and constantly enriched segment of contemporary folklore and religious culture, and its analysis should be regarded as just as natural as the study of any other belief, faith or religion” (Povedák, 2019: 364). As a vernacular religious phenomenon, the varied narratives and ideas about UFOs and ETs have not been codified or promoted by mainstream religious organizations; rather, they thrive as a non-institutionalized and fluid corpus of beliefs with no formally systematized doctrines or sanctioned religious authorities to maintain or control them. Such beliefs can be usefully understood within the framework of vernacular religion proposed by folklorist Leonard Norman Primiano (1995) who emphasizes “lived religion” and the dynamics of constructing belief systems, which are contextualized in terms of continuities and innovations in human expressive behavior.<sup>2</sup> Created at a grassroots level apart from the channels of official religious authority, the flying saucer mythology was initially formed and elaborated upon through contactee encounters, visions, hierophanous events, and related narratives that were then interpreted and disseminated through informal networks and developed into specific systems of belief. This nascent mythos of new gods and superhuman technology was created from a bricolage of religious and secular ideas, incorporating aspects of esoteric teachings, the Bible, Eastern religions, Theosophy, Guy Ballard’s “I AM” Religious Activity, beliefs about Ascended Masters, the discourse of science, advancements in space exploration, sci-fi pulp fiction, pseudoscience, and popular imaginings of life on other planets.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is based on the paper, “Alien Encounters, Apocalyptic Anxiety, and Extraterrestrial Alterity” presented at the conference *Anthropology of Encounters: Frictions in the Past, Present and Future*, organized by the Hungarian Cultural Anthropological Association and the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Szeged, Hungary, November 4-5, 2016. I am grateful to Michael Owen Jones and István Povedák for their comments and helpful suggestions for this expanded version of that presentation.

<sup>2</sup> Discussions of the concept of vernacular religion from the perspective of folklore studies can be found in Primiano (1995), Howard (2011), and Bowman, Valk (2012).

Like earlier myths, UFO cosmologies are etiological knowledge systems that offer an understanding of the world and explain the origin of human beings, the nature of good and evil, the unfolding of human history, the meaning of human existence, the fate of humanity, and the nature of the universe.<sup>3</sup> To be clear, myth in this context is defined as a profoundly significant or sacred narrative that embodies a societal worldview and expresses the relationship of human beings to Earth and the universe. Mythologies address absolute realities and issues of ultimate concern, providing a comprehensive view of the world and an understanding of one's relationship to it, as well as explanations of the role of otherworldly beings in human life, the afterlife, and in the cosmos. Discussions of mythology often emphasize origin myths set in a primordial time and focus on the creation of things and an explanation of the world. But mythic narratives also describe endings, or eschatology—the study of “the last things,” from the Greek *eschatos*, “last” or “furthest.” Eschatological myths may address both individual endings and that of the cosmos, whether the judgment of the dead, the destiny of the soul after death, the nature of afterlife, apocalypse and salvation, and the ultimate fate of the world. UFO mythologies, developed in the midst of Cold War apocalyptic fears, emerged as a modern manifestation of cosmic eschatology, with a focus on the end of the world, the end of humanity, the fate of humanity after that ending, and the creation of a perfect age. In cosmic eschatological frameworks, apocalyptic endings are not necessarily considered to be negative events, as the end of the world is usually regarded in terms of millennial salvation and deliverance. In the case of numerous flying saucer myths, salvation may be offered through the promise of planetary evacuation prior to worldly destruction, as well as the assurance of a coming golden age, whether on another planet or on Earth after its catastrophic cleansing and renewal.

This essay initially explores the formation of the early flying saucer mythology that arose in the 1950s and 1960s as expressed in the explicitly religious and mystical narrative accounts that describe contact with extraterrestrial beings. Tracing the trajectory of the flying saucer faith, I examine the features of such beliefs and chart the ways they were simultaneously configured within existing esoteric traditions but also were innovative technomythological expressions of long-standing beliefs about celestial savior beings interceding during times of crisis. In the second portion of the essay I examine the relationship of these UFO-related eschatological themes to the creation mythologies that developed in association with the UFO phenomenon, exemplified by popular ideas about “ancient astronauts” said to have intervened throughout human history to guide the progression of civilization on Earth. These ancient alien beliefs meld the discourses of science and spirituality, as the deities and supernatural accounts in world mythologies and religions are de-mystified and reinterpreted in terms of extraterrestrial intervention and advanced alien technologies in a seemingly secularized creationist mythology of human origins and history. The third

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<sup>3</sup> For a sampling of approaches to the study of mythology, see Dundes 1984; Segal 1999; Doty 2000; Ellwood 2008; Thompson, Schrempf, 2020.

section of the essay presents case studies of several well-known UFO religious groups and analyses the mythic aspects of their belief systems, focusing in particular on apocalyptic and millennialist scenarios (echoed in their creation myths), and the redemptive role of extraterrestrials in the last days. As technology-infused innovations on previous mythologies, the varied eschatological narratives that characterize UFO religions offer insights into the creation of millennialist traditions and the appeal of such beliefs while also exemplifying the primary forms of millennialist thought, with broader application for an understanding of eschatological mythmaking in general. Although this essay focuses on selected religious themes expressed in UFO mythologies, the vast and multivalent terrain of ET and UFO belief provides a rich resource for the study of additional vernacular spiritualities, myths, and demonologies, not only in the form of familiar narratives about alien abductions, crop circles, the “men in black,” and ominous conspiracy theories, but also with regard to the remarkable ways that ideas about extraterrestrials have been incorporated into established religious traditions.<sup>4</sup>

## THE ORIGINS OF MODERN UFO MYTHOLOGIES

For some flying saucer enthusiasts, UFOs and extraterrestrials have been visiting planet Earth since the beginning of human history. Ufologists have interpreted hundreds of instances of unusual aerial phenomena from antiquity to the early 1900s as possible UFO sightings and these historical accounts of enigmatic objects in the sky and weird celestial wonders have been incorporated into an explanatory paradigm of interplanetary visitations.<sup>5</sup> However, the modern era of flying saucer belief began on June 24, 1947, the day private pilot Kenneth Arnold (1918–1984) reported seeing nine shining objects flying in formation in the sky near Mt. Rainier, Washington. When talking to a reporter about the erratic flight of the objects (not their shape, which he described as resembling boomerangs or crescents), Arnold said they *moved* like a saucer would if it was skipped across the water. His statement was misinterpreted or creatively rephrased, and the term *flying saucers* was coined in media reports. News coverage of the story was extensive and captured the popular imagination. The concept of a saucer-like disc flying through the sky soon became the dominant representation of a UFO, the prototype that apparently spawned thousands of sightings of saucer-shaped craft during the two week period after Arnold’s account was publicized.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> For scholarly resources related to these topics, consult the sources listed in endnote number 1.

<sup>5</sup> See Vallee, 1969; Vallee, Aubeck, 2010; Aubeck, Shough, 2015, for an overview of unexplained aerial phenomena throughout human history.

<sup>6</sup> See Bloecher 1967: xiii, and Bullard 2010: 26–27. Prior to the Arnold sighting, saucer-shaped flying machines occasionally had been depicted in science fiction magazines such as *Science Wonder Stories*, *Air Wonder Stories*, and *Amazing Stories*, which also may have influenced the subsequent formation of the flying saucer image so ubiquitous today.

In addition to the plethora of saucer sightings, another event occurred shortly after the Arnold account that needs mentioning: the report of the alleged crash of a flying disc near Roswell, New Mexico on July 8, 1947, that was quickly re-identified by the U.S. Air Force as a weather balloon. Although the Roswell incident has now become the most famous event in UFO lore, generating an excess of conspiracy theories and a mythology of its own, it was not until 1980 that a renewed interest in the Roswell crash occurred, and it did not have much impact during the early years of UFO religiosity and mythology (Partridge, 2003b: 5–6).<sup>7</sup> While the Roswell incident may have been a blip on the radar of saucer reportage at the time, the idea of flying saucers quickly permeated American culture and consciousness, even if most people were not sure what they were or whether they had extraterrestrial origins (Saler et al., 1997: 13). In a Gallup poll taken on August 19, 1947, less than two months after the term *flying saucers* had been introduced, more than ninety percent of Americans had heard about saucers. Such a level of awareness of a topic was almost unprecedented in previous Gallup polls; notably, only a small percentage of the population thought the objects were from outer space (Ziegler, 2003: 350–351).

During the next decade, mythologies and religious movements based on flying saucers developed, as belief in the possible extraterrestrial origins of UFOs increased throughout the 1950s. Although these emergent religious ideas about extraterrestrials were initiated by the Arnold sighting, belief in communication with beings from outer space was not entirely new. Among the most well-known were the encounters of the Swedish scientist and Christian theologian Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), who claimed to have journeyed to other planets and witnessed advanced, utopian civilizations. In the 1890s, the French Spiritualist Hélène Smith (1861–1932) provided accounts of her travels to Mars and depicted what life was like there, transcribing the Martian language, illustrating Martian scenery, and communicating Martian messages through automatic writing while in a mediumistic trance.<sup>8</sup> While other reports of interplanetary encounters and unusual aerial sightings occurred over the years (the most famous being the airship wave of 1896–1897 and the “foo fighters” of World War II), these earlier accounts did not become the basis for full-fledged religious belief systems like those inspired by the Arnold sighting and other UFO testimonies in the decades that followed.

The religious meanings of flying saucers that arose in the 1950s were established by the initial flying saucer prophets, such as George Adamski, Orfeo Angelucci, Daniel Fry, Truman Bethurum, George Hunt Williamson, and George Van Tassel. These contactees claimed to be in communication with the benevolent inhabitants of flying saucers and they presented specific spiritual and mythic discourses that sacralized saucers and ETs. Their emphasis on futuristic technology as vehicles of salvation was a contemporary development

<sup>7</sup> For a thorough analysis of the rumors, legends, and mythology of the Roswell incident, see Saler et al. (1997).

<sup>8</sup> An extensive survey of contactee accounts from the 1750s to the 1980s is provided by Melton, 1995, and Melton, Eberhart 1995.

in the history of religion that only could have occurred in the space age. Yet most of the concepts that informed these early contactee cosmologies did not appear entirely out of blue. As noted, the main influences on early UFO religions had their sources in occult and esoteric traditions, particularly Theosophy and the “I AM” Religious Activity. An important idea that materialized in varying guises in the formative UFO faiths involves the notion of Ascended Masters (also referred to as Masters of the Ancient Wisdom), developed by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) who co-founded the Theosophical Society in 1875. In Theosophical doctrines, the Ascended Masters are a hierarchy of enlightened beings who were once human, and who through spiritual transformation have become immortal. It is believed that these benevolent intermediary beings (including Jesus, Gautama Buddha, the Virgin Mary, Confucius, and the Archangel Michael) now serve to guide the spiritual evolution of humanity.

In Blavatsky’s writings, some of the Ascended Masters are actually said to be from other planets; the most important of the celestial bodies is Venus where the Lords of the Flame such as Sanat Kumara and the Lords of the Seven Rays reside (Melton, 1995: 6; Flaherty, 2011: 591). The extraterrestrial abode of these and other Masters was not especially emphasized by Blavatsky, but it was later elaborated upon by others in the Theosophical tradition, particularly in the teachings of Guy Ballard (1878–1939) who formed the “I AM” Religious Activity in the 1930s. While he was hiking on Mount Shasta (California) in 1930, Ballard said he encountered the Ascended Master Saint Germain, who later introduced him to twelve Venusians, the spiritually-advanced Lords of the Flame of the Theosophical pantheon; subsequently, they shared scenes of their civilization on Venus and conveyed ancient, universal wisdom in their effort to transform humanity (Melton, 1995: 6–7).

## CONTACTEES AND THE FORMATION OF THE FLYING SAUCER MYTHOS

The Venusians described by Ballard appeared to him without use of a physical vehicle of interplanetary transportation. The first alleged contact with an extraterrestrial visiting Earth in a flying saucer is generally attributed to George Adamski (1891–1965), the most famous of the early contactees and arguably the initial prophet of UFO religiosity. Adamski said his encounter occurred on November 20, 1952 in California’s Mohave Desert where he met a beautiful humanoid from Venus named Orthon who was of medium height with shoulder-length, sandy-colored hair. Through telepathy and hand gestures, Orthon explained that he came in peace and to warn about the dangers of nuclear weapons which were not only a threat to all life on earth but also would have harmful radioactive effects on the universe and other planetary beings (Leslie, Adamski, 1953: 198–199). Depicted as an angelic-like celestial being, Orthon’s message to earthlings was one of benevolent kindness: “His expression was one of understanding, and great compassion; as one would have

toward a much loved child who had erred through ignorance and lack of understanding” (ibid.: 198). In his account, Adamski revealed that Orthons and other Space Brothers (as he referred to them) who were visiting Earth from various planets were highly sophisticated beings, concerned with the future of humanity. Adamski emphasized that the Space Brothers’ advanced saucer technologies were intertwined with their spiritual development in a joining of science and religion that was necessary for interplanetary travel. In later encounters Adamski said he had journeyed to numerous planets and met various “Masters,” including a thousand-year-old philosopher of the planetary beings who imparted cosmic wisdom. These spiritually and technologically evolved entities lived in harmony with the universe in utopian societies and they offered guidance for the survival and enlightenment of human beings in the midst of nuclear threat. Adamski learned that he was chosen by the Masters to convey their messages to planet Earth and that Jesus also had been a previous messenger sent by these higher beings to help earthlings.

At the time of his encounter, Adamski, who was born in Poland but lived most of his life in the United States, staffed a small hamburger stand near the renowned Mt. Palomar Observatory. He had been interested in outer space and science fiction since at least the 1940s. With the publication of his UFO encounters in the bestseller, *Flying Saucers Have Landed* (Leslie, Adamski, 1953), Adamski became a celebrity. His messages from the space people not only captivated a wide audience but established the template for subsequent contactee accounts. The wisdom espoused by the Space Brothers may have seemed new or futuristic in the flying saucer framework, but Adamski apparently had been teaching the same basic concepts since the 1930s, devoid of references to saucers. In 1936, he founded the Royal Order of Tibet in southern California, an occult lodge with Theosophical influences; his later flying-saucer infused “cosmic philosophy” was a reworking of these earlier ideas, such as notions of spiritual evolution, reincarnation, and the ascension of the eternal soul to higher realms (Leslie, Adamski, 1953: 201–204; Ellwood, 1995: 178; Partridge, 2003b: 14–17).

Even though many of Adamski’s claims have been easily refuted by skeptics and most ufologists consider him a fraud and hindrance to the serious empirical study of UFOs, whether hoaxer or not, he provided a religious context for the mythologizing of UFOs and ETs. He gave a mythic meaning to the mystery of flying saucers and supplied a primary narrative structure for the encounter experience by explaining that the saucers had come to warn humanity of the dangers of atomic weapons and to save us from nuclear annihilation. This narrative closely resembles the plot of the film *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), released one year before Adamski’s alleged encounter, in which a saucer lands near the White House and the Christ-like alien Klaatu forewarns of the threat of atomic bombs. To what extent that film and previous science fiction depictions of spacecraft visiting Earth influenced parallel contactee accounts is speculative, but the concept of alien visitation clearly existed in the popular imagination. Adamski and other early contactees embodied and enacted this narrative of atomic threat, interplanetary intervention, and worldly salvation.

After Adamski, the UFO mythos and its emerging prophetic milieu was bolstered by two celebrated contactees, Truman Bethurum (1898–1969) and Daniel Fry (1908–1992), both of whom published books in 1954 that recounted their flying saucer experiences and relayed the aliens' concerns about nuclear testing and apocalyptic catastrophes while offering a vision of the peaceful life on other planets. In Fry's account, the extraterrestrial visitors are descendents of the ancient civilizations of Atlantis, Lemuria, and Mu, which were destroyed in an escalating show of scientific power, resulting in a nuclear war (Fry, 1954: 63). The few space people who escaped the destruction now have returned to warn us of the dangers of atomic weapons, in an ancient astronaut echo of Cold War apocalypticism.

George King (1919–1997), who founded the Aetherius Society (discussed in more detail below), claimed contact with a cosmic master in 1954 named Aetherius, who also communicated messages about coming atomic cataclysms while providing spiritual instructions for a return to cosmic principles to avert disasters. The book-length account by Orfeo Angelucci (1912–1993) that was published in 1955 also included extensive spiritual themes, prophetic overtones, and warnings about a coming "rain of fire" and the end of civilization to be caused by human beings, with space beings returning to Earth to save humanity and assist in its ongoing spiritual progress.<sup>9</sup>

Today the evolution of Earth both material and spiritual has reached its most critical point. Thus chronologically speaking the hour has struck upon our planet which has not only permitted, but demanded the influx of outer space entities and their material manifestation in our sphere of consciousness. They have come as harbingers of light to do everything possible to turn the tide of destruction which threatens to engulf Earth and terminate in a new fall for man into greater darkness and bondage in heavier chains of matter. (Angelucci, 1955: 165)

In Angelucci's narrative, his initiation as a saint-like messenger and prophet of the atomic age is made clear after an encounter in which he notices a strange stigmata on his body below his heart. He describes the imprint as an inflamed circle with a dot in the center. It was, he writes, "the symbol of the hydrogen atom. I realized they had impressed that mark upon my body to convince me beyond all doubt of the reality of my experiences in the cold light of the coming days" (Angelucci, 1955: 36).

Prior to such revelatory accounts by contactees, flying saucer sightings were an enigma that had no specific cultural meaning assigned to them. By explaining that the vehicles came from outer space and were inhabited by benevolent beings interceding at a time of crisis, contactees created a meaningful narrative, a techno-mythology that deified futuristic spacecraft, interplanetary communion, and otherworldly salvation. As these initial

<sup>9</sup> See Angelucci, 1953: 59–60, 1955: 123–124. Angelucci's 1953 account appeared in Ray Palmer's *Mystic Magazine* and is an abbreviated and slightly different version than that presented in the book-length work published in 1955.



contactee accounts shared similar elements, the general narrative framework that arose was characterized by the following features: the space beings often make contact in an isolated location with an ordinary person, a chosen one, who is drawn to the spot by an inexplicable feeling or telepathic message. During this theophanic encounter, the beings may explain their saucer technology, invite the contactee into the spaceship, and take the earthling on a journey through space and to other planets. The alien visitors are not monstrous invaders like the pre-World II space creatures often depicted in science fiction pulp magazines, but are ineffably beautiful and human-like in appearance with superhuman abilities of cognition, superior spiritual development, and the requisite technology which is highly advanced in alignment with their spiritual attainment. Coming from utopian civilizations, these beings bring messages of peace and brotherhood while warning of imminent disasters because of the failures of human beings who are said to be less evolved spiritually. The space people are intervening in human affairs because of an urgent concern with the condition of humanity and planet earth, especially the use of atomic bombs. The contactee is ultimately given a crucial and prophetic mission: to warn others of impending catastrophe and spread the ufonauts' message of harmony and spiritual enlightenment in the hope of saving humanity.<sup>10</sup>

The prophetic role of the initial UFO contactees may be usefully contextualized in terms of sociologist Max Weber's typology of religious prophets—what he identified as the “exemplary type” and the “emissary type.” According to Weber, the religious authority of the exemplary type of prophet is based in the individual's personal religious experience which then serves as an example to devotees, such as Gautama the Buddha's enlightenment under the Bodhi tree becoming a model for the religious aspirations of others (Weber 1963: 46 ff.; Ellwood, Partin, 1988: 277–278). The emissary prophet is one who receives a divine message and is obligated to communicate it to others, such as the prophets referred to in biblical scriptures. UFO contactees are primarily prophets of the emissary type, as mediators between humanity and superhuman beings, conveying important messages on behalf of those beings. In addition to the prophetic aspects, contactee accounts also exhibit some of the features of shamanic experiences, such as marvelous journeys to other worlds (whether by soul travel or spaceship), communication with superior beings, initiatory experiences, dissociative states, and mediumship. While contactees may not explicitly seem to be “soul specialists,” psychopomps, or healers like traditional shamans (although a few allegedly exhibited these abilities), there are shamanic similarities in that contactees claim to travel between realms as intermediaries and they return from their journeys bringing otherworldly wisdom and eschatological knowledge for the benefit of human beings. Like the shaman, contactees have been “called” to convey such messages, though their function as healers extends beyond a local community and usually is more broadly directed at saving humanity from destruction and guiding the evolution of souls on Earth.

<sup>10</sup> See Ellwood, Partin, 1988: 113, and Peebles, 1994: 105–107, for the formulaic aspects of the early contactee mythology.

The foundational charisma of these initial contactees was situated primarily in the recounting of memorates—personal experience narratives of first hand encounters of a super-human kind, whether involving flying saucers, extraterrestrials, or interplanetary journeys. While the early contactees had a subcultural following, most of these individuals did not establish organized religious groups; they communicated their messages instead through non-mainstream publications, public lectures, and conventions. The most significant early venue that gathered together the major contactees (Adamski, Angelucci, Bethurum, Fry, etc.) and those interested in flying saucers was the Giant Rock Interplanetary Spacecraft Convention held annually from 1953 to 1977 in the Southern California desert approximately 50 miles north of Palm Springs. Organized by George Van Tassel (1910–1978), the event regularly attracted an estimated 5,000–10,000 flying saucer enthusiasts at the height of its popularity in the late 1950s and it established a meeting ground for the otherwise scattered UFO subculture. At the conventions, contactees lectured and sold their publications, while those in attendance exchanged the latest UFO news and perused the related metaphysical literature. Van Tassel, who lived in the dug-out chambers beneath Giant Rock (a huge boulder in the desert seven stories in height), also claimed he communicated with space beings by means of telepathically-channeled messages. In Van Tassel's view, certain people were especially attuned to receiving extraterrestrial information and he believed specific techniques could be taught to allow such advanced forms of communication. Regular channeling sessions and retreats were held at Giant Rock with the primary entity who contacted Van Tassel identified as Ashtar, the Commander and Chief of the Ashtar Galactic Command, a space fleet of thousands of saucers sent to assist and rescue humanity (Helland, 2003: 497–501).

Similar to the messages from other extraterrestrials delivered to the early contactees, Ashtar's missives to Van Tassel warned of the dangers of the nuclear weapons and an imminent apocalyptic catastrophe that would "extinguish humanity and turn this planet into a cinder."<sup>11</sup> Van Tassel's channeled communications were soon embraced by others who also claimed to transmit Ashtar's teachings, resulting in schisms, competing channelers, and a network of believers connected to a diffuse Ashtar Command movement. The most influential in this circle include the channeler Tuella (Thelma B. Terrell) and the messages circulated by Guardian Action International (renamed Guardian Activation International) which have been promoted in recent years by Internet websites devoted to Ashtar. Like other UFO faiths, the Ashtar Command is a syncretic religious phenomenon that includes a diversity of deities from an assortment of religious traditions, resulting in a complex mythology of cosmic beings and spiritual masters from diverse planets, including Commander Ashtar, Jesus Christ (known as Sananda), Lady Master Athena, Koron and Monka (both from Mars), Andromeda Rex, Hatonn, Soltec, and familiar Ascended Masters

<sup>11</sup> "First Message From Ashtar." Galactic Federation of Light website (<http://www.galacticfederation-naplesfl.org/ashtar-1952---first-message.html>).

from the Theosophical tradition (Beckley, 1992; Tuella, 1993). The communiqués from the deities of the Ashtar Command exemplify the established saucerian paradigm, warning of nuclear holocaust and other cataclysms, but offering salvation if humanity responds to their intergalactic admonitions. Catastrophe is said to be imminent, but believers are reassured that the Command, with its enormous fleet of starships, will descend from the skies and rescue the chosen ones in an Endtime evacuation scenario referred to as the “Great Exodus of Human Souls Off This Planet,” escorting the saved ones to a large mothership or to specific planets in accordance with each person’s level of spiritual development (Beckley, 1980: 23–29; Tuella, 1993).

As is obvious by the themes expressed in the early contactee narratives, the sense of catastrophe and apocalyptic foreboding that characterizes the initial flying saucer mythos is directly related to the threat of the nuclear weapons, which is a persistent concern that underlies the theology of numerous UFO religious groups that formed over time. As various commentators have observed, the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August, 1945, drastically altered contemporary culture and thought, fueling fears of global annihilation. The Soviet Union’s first atomic bomb test in 1949 and the resulting proliferation of nuclear weapons further increased such fears and resulted in widespread feelings of societal crisis and impending doom (Boyer 1985). It has been argued that the threat of nuclear warfare formed the context of life during the Cold War period, with the image of the Bomb casting an ominous shadow of death that intruded upon everyday culture and individual consciousness (Thompson, 1981: 171; Linton, Falk, 1982: 3). These fears associated with nuclear war were characterized by a sense of helplessness and fatalism. Nuclear catastrophe was often viewed as uncontrollable and inevitable, an ever present reality that evoked images of imminent death and the demise of all humanity (Boyer, 1985: 278–281; Lifton, 1987: 10–27; Wojcik, 1997: 133–147).

In the context of such apocalyptic anxieties, the narratives by contactees promising extraterrestrial salvation provided an eschatological explanation with mythic resonance that addressed Cold War apprehensions of nuclear annihilation. The benevolent aliens are envisioned as intergalactic intercessors and savior beings who not only attempt to avert nuclear war but who provide a vision of the idyllic life on other planets where advanced humanoids live for thousands of years or are immortal, and where there is no warfare, poverty, suffering, or unhappiness. As superior, celestial beings that descend from the heavens, extraterrestrials resemble the angelic messengers in other religious traditions, appearing during times of crisis and conveying cosmic wisdom. In his often-cited treatise, *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies* (1959), psychologist Carl Jung proposed that UFOs may be understood as “technological angels” that emerged in the modern era in response to the Cold War and rapid advancements in technology.<sup>12</sup> Jung

<sup>12</sup> In the epilogue of his book, Jung actually discusses Orfeo Angelucci’s visionary saucer experiences to support his theories.

argued that with the world divided into two hostile superpowers with atomic weapons, people looked to the skies for a resolution of the predicament. But in an increasingly secular age, many people may have lost faith in the idea of God's miraculous intercession—but they are willing to believe in the intervention by advanced beings in space-ships, as a modernized and seemingly scientific manifestation of the divine. Jung focused on descriptions of flying saucers as circular disks, which he said were manifestations of the mandala, an archetypal image existing in the collective unconscious shared by all humankind, and which appears in mythology, religion, and iconography throughout the world. The mandala, in Jung's view, was a symbol of harmony, psychic wholeness, and of God; he suggested that the mandala-shaped saucers were archetypal psychic projections visualized in the sky expressing the widespread yearning for stability and reconciliation in the atomic age (Jung, 1978: 14–23). One need not accept Jung's mandala-archetype analysis to agree with his general thesis, supported by the contactee narratives of the time, that the alien intercessors are the functional equivalent of atomic age angels and technologically developed godlike beings intervening during a time of crisis. In this context, the flying saucer not only represents a benevolent and angelic technology in contrast to the deathly technology of atomic weapons, but offers a vision of planetary peace and harmony. At a time when the Bomb and the mushroom cloud became master symbols of inescapable death and destruction, the flying saucer emerged as a vernacular icon of hope and deliverance in the nuclear era.

## OLD MYTHS MADE NEW: ANCIENT ASTRONAUTS AND UFO CREATION MYTHOLOGIES

In concert with the angelic and eschatological themes that characterize the early flying saucer mythologies, origin myths about UFOs also arose at the popular and vernacular level, exemplified by beliefs about ancient astronauts and their role in human evolution. These technologically-based creationist narratives, referred to collectively as the “ancient-astronaut hypothesis,” are based on the assertion that extraterrestrials have visited the Earth for millennia, profoundly influencing the development, culture, and technology of human beings. In some scenarios the ancient astronauts have created the species of *homo sapiens*, whether scientifically or by mating with the Earth's unevolved inhabitants. Within this UFO cosmology, the references in earlier mythologies and religious traditions to deities descending from the sky to the earthly realm are interpreted as evidence of extraterrestrial visitations. From this perspective, creation mythologies cross-culturally originated in the attempt by early humans to understand the advanced intelligence and apparently godlike technology of alien astronaut encounters. Not only are the world's religions explained in this way, but also prehistoric archeological artifacts, from cave paintings, Egyptian hieroglyphs, and ancient Mayan designs to Stonehenge and the statues on Easter Island.

The most influential exponent of the ancient astronaut hypothesis is Erich von Däniken (1935–), who authored the best-selling book *Chariots of the Gods?* (1968) and numerous sequels. Ancient astronaut ideas also have been promoted in more recent years by other proponents including Zecharia Sitchin, Robert Temple, David Hatcher Childress, and Giorgio Tsoukalos, as well as by popular television programs such as the History Channel’s ongoing series, “Ancient Aliens.” Although von Däniken’s books introduced ET astronaut beliefs to millions of readers in the late 1960s and 1970s, such ideas had been percolating since the early 1900s and had been expressed by various flying saucer contactees and authors in the 1950s and 1960s. The initial popularization of the ancient astronaut notion frequently is attributed to Charles Fort (1874–1932), considered a proto-ufologist known for his books on anomalous phenomena. In 1919, Fort not only presented examples of unexplained aerial events in his *Book of the Damned*, but advanced the idea that the Earth may have been colonized in the past and was somehow “the property” of extraterrestrial beings. In the early 1920s he proposed that historical accounts of some supernatural occurrences were the possible result of “beings and objects that visited this earth, not from a spiritual existence, but from outer space” (Fort, 1967: 157–158; 1974: 419–420).

Less familiar writings on interplanetary visitors in the early 1900s include the works of Theosophists who expanded upon Blavatsky’s ideas about the “Lords of the Flame” (the Ascended Masters from Venus), said to have had visited Earth on occasion to assist in the spiritual growth of human beings. For example, in the book *The Lost Lemuria* (1904), Blavatsky’s student William Scott-Elliot describes evolved adepts and exalted beings from Venus who visited Earth to impart their wisdom to the ancient Lemurians. The book *Man: Whence, How and Whither* (1913), by Theosophists Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater, also discusses the Venusian involvement in human history. These Theosophical works later served as an inspiration for assorted fantasy and science fiction writers who further explored the ancient alien concept, most notably H.P. Lovecraft (1890–1937) whose stories depict the extraterrestrial “Great Old Ones” of the Cthulhu Mythos as the ancient colonizers and rulers of Earth and creators of life on the planet. Lovecraft’s writings had a distinct influence on later ancient astronaut enthusiasts (Colavito, 2005: 20–26, 74–78).

As the belief in ascended space beings germinated within Theosophical circles and ideas about ancient astronaut flourished in fantasy and science fiction genres throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the publications by flying saucer contactees in the 1950s provided further details about the role of aliens in the human project. For example, the books by Adamski describe how the Space Brothers have lived on planet Earth at certain times throughout human history, visiting Earth periodically to assist in human progress. In Adamski’s co-authored book, *Flying Saucers Have Landed* (1953), the first section is written by Irish-Anglo occultist Desmond Leslie (1921–2001) who provides an extensive history of prehistoric saucer visitations, with chapters on the appearance of saucers in ancient India, in Celtic prehistory, and “before the Flood,” as well as the relation of alien contact to the Great Pyramid of Giza in Egypt, the lost continents of Atlantis and Mu, and further alien

astronaut evidence in Aztec, Incan, and other ancient cultures. In a reading offered repeatedly by ancient astronaut advocates, flying saucers are identified as the *vimanas* referred to in Hindu texts and Sanskrit epics—flying vehicles and airborne palaces used by Hindu deities as a means of travel. In Leslie's account, the first landing of a *vimana* is said to have occurred eighteen million years ago, piloted by the Lords of the Flame from Venus who came to teach and spiritually guide primitive human beings. Accordingly, the arrival of these enlightened beings from another planet in spectacular airships was a momentous event that Leslie says is recorded in mythologies worldwide: "these shining beings [...] were the original Immortal Gods on which later pantheons are based. Every legend, Greek, Roman, Egyptian, South American, Indian or Persian, of the gods coming to Earth can be traced back as a race memory of this one tremendous event" (Leslie, Adamski, 1953: 167).

A comparable ancient astronaut paradigm that offered a revisionist version of world mythology was proposed by UFO contactee George Hunt Williamson (1926–1986), who detailed the involvement of space beings in major historical events and the development of civilization. Williamson obtained much of this information about the alien influences in human history from cosmic beings he contacted through a home-made Ouija board. These telepathic communications revealed the extraterrestrials' role in the establishment of major world religions; the ancient aliens' visitations also were reflected in Native American legends and archeological findings, such as the lines and figuration in the Nazca Desert in Peru being prehistoric directional markers for spacecraft (e.g., Williamson, 1959). In searching for mysterious phenomena and the key narratives of religions cross-culturally for references to sky gods, fiery chariots, celestial disks, and other flying objects and then refiguring these into an alien astronaut framework, Williamson, Leslie, and others transformed these older world mythologies into an all-encompassing modern myth of human origin and development.

This emergent space age mythology coalesced in von Däniken's best-seller, *Chariots of the Gods?* Published in 1968, the book drew upon previous writings about alien astronauts and presented these ideas in an appealing and seemingly secularist, scientific style. Although heavily criticized and debunked by scholarly experts who accused him of using pseudoscientific evidence to support his theories (and for his apparent plagiarism of previous writings), von Däniken's books fueled a fascination with the topic and have sold an estimated 70 million copies, making him one of the best-selling authors of all time.<sup>13</sup> Even though such

<sup>13</sup> "Aliens Will Return to Earth Within 20 Years," Chariots of the Gods Author Predicts. *Yahoo UK* website (<https://uk.news.yahoo.com/aliens-will-return-to-earth-within-20-years-chariots-of-the-gods-author-predicts-141829853.html>). Von Däniken's ideas even infiltrated communist bloc countries, where UFO narratives and discourses previously had been largely suppressed; see Povedák (2019) for an insightful discussion of UFO culture and paleoastronaut theories that existed behind the Iron Curtain during the socialist era. Von Däniken's critics assert that he borrowed ideas directly from the writings of Desmond Leslie (Leslie, Adamski, 1953), Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier's *The Morning of the Magicians* (1960), and the works of Robert Charroux, such as *One Hundred Thousand Years of Man's Unknown History* (1963). See Story, 1976, for a criticism of von Däniken's initial writings.

ideas may not be accepted by the scientific establishment, the enormous interest in ancient astronaut speculation reveals the neo-mythic and religio-scientific appeal of such beliefs.

Like those before him, von Däniken finds evidence of space beings in the mythologies, legends, and archeological artifacts of cultures throughout the world, with particular focus on objects, accounts, and structures that seem anachronistic and somehow illustrative of complex ET technologies deemed too sophisticated for prehistoric peoples. For example, ancient astronauts are credited for the impressive architectural accomplishments of antiquity, such as the construction of the pyramids, the Moai of Easter Island, Stonehenge, and the Nazca lines, while ancient imagery worldwide is decoded as depictions of flying saucers, astronauts and space suits, and advanced technology—such as the renowned stone carving on a sarcophagus of a Maya ruler of Palenque and the ancient Japanese Dogū figurines, said to look like astronauts. Von Däniken sums up his ancient astronaut theory in one of his sequel publications as follows: “That in prehistoric and early historic times the Earth was visited by unknown beings from the Cosmos; that these unknown beings created human intelligence by a deliberate genetic mutation; that the extra-terrestrials ennobled hominids ‘in their own image’; that these visits to Earth by alien beings from the Cosmos were recorded and handed down in religions, mythologies and popular legends, and that in some places the extra-terrestrials also deposited physical signs of their presence on Earth” (von Däniken, 1977: back cover).

Unlike many of the initial flying saucer contactees who viewed the visitors from outer space as ascended masters guiding humanity’s spiritual progression, von Däniken does not necessarily consider these alien astronauts to be elevated religious beings. Instead, the alleged evidence for his theories is presented as scientific, rationalist, and based on historical evidence. For von Däniken, the gods of antiquity and earthly religions in general originated in the attempt by early human beings to understand the seemingly supernatural abilities of these ancient astronauts, and he draws a parallel with the phenomenon of the “cargo cults” that arose among some indigenous peoples in Oceania after initial contact with Westerners. Similar to the ways in which native Melanesian peoples created religious rituals and beliefs in response to the advanced technologies and abundance of remarkable material goods (the “cargo”) of the first Europeans they encountered, von Däniken argues that early humans developed similar myths and rituals to explain their encounters with technologically superior space beings. In his recurring argument, this “supernaturalized” interpretation of ancient alien contact is reflected in religious accounts of miracles, wondrous celestial occurrences, and other alien allusions in artifacts and sacred texts throughout the world, including the Sanskrit epic the *Mahabharata*, the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and the Maya *Popol Vuh*.

In his discussion of the Old Testament, von Däniken suggests that the account of Ezekiel’s vision of spinning or revolving wheels making a rushing noise is an eye-witness report of spacecraft; that the Ark of the Covenant is some sort of electrically-charged alien technology and ET communication system; and that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah by fire and brimstone describes a nuclear cataclysm, with Lot’s wife the victim of

radiation (von Däniken, 1969: 44–51). Less known but similar theories have been advanced by others who have readily explained biblical accounts in terms of flying saucer encounters. Books such as *The Bible and Flying Saucers* (Downing, 1968), *God Drives a Flying Saucer* (Dione, 1973), and *Extraterrestrials in Biblical Prophecy* (Schellhorn, 1990) offer a variety of biblical reinterpretations, asserting that UFOs may have parted the Red Sea and led the Israelites out of Egypt; that Moses had an alien encounter when he experienced the angel of the Lord in the flame of the “burning bush”; that the Star of Bethlehem followed by the three Magi was a spaceship; and that the Nephilim described in Genesis 6 were alien-human hybrids, the gigantic offspring of the “sons of God” (space beings) who had sexual intercourse with the daughters of men. Other saucer-inspired biblical readings propose that the “chariot of fire” that appeared as Elijah ascended into heaven was a spacecraft; that Adam and Eve were genetically engineered proto-humans; that the angel Gabriel was an alien who hypnotized Mary and artificially inseminated her with advanced technology; and that Christ was an enlightened space being whose miracles, transfiguration, and ascension were caused by ET activity.

The countless other extraterrestrial explanations for significant religious accounts, historical events, monuments, and human achievements that have been offered by ancient astronaut proponents are too numerous to characterize here, although some of the more popular topics have included pre-Columbian crystal skulls with paranormal powers; crop circles; alien-like elongated skulls of ancient Egyptians and among certain Native American tribes; prehistoric “Baghdad batteries”; and ancient Anunnaki astronauts from the twelfth planet “Nibiru” referred to in Sumerian mythology who genetically created homo sapiens as servant laborers to mine gold. Despite the multiplicity of such paleoastronaut theories, all are based on a similar underlying euhemeristic interpretation of mythology and religion in which the deities and mythic narratives of the past are assumed to have their origins in actual historical events that have been attributed with supernatural and mythological significance over time. In these alien astronaut understandings of the world, previous creation mythologies and religious narratives are not dismissed or rejected. Instead, they are embraced as fundamentally true, but they are stripped of their sacred meaning and de-mythologized in an attempted scientific search for historical proofs that are verified by references to modern and futuristic technologies (i.e., the genetic engineering of the human race by extraterrestrials; Elijah’s ascent into heaven in a spaceship; the Hindu *vimanas* as flying saucers). From this perspective, it is only because of recent advancements in human technology, particularly space technology and travel, that humanity is finally capable of comprehending the historical traces of the ancient astronaut influences that are embedded in world mythology, religion, and archeological artifacts.

Despite the fact that alien astronaut theories are presented as scientific and secularized interpretations of human history, they deny conventional scientific explanations of the history of the world and propose instead an alternative scientized creation myth. Dismissed by the established scientific community, ancient astronaut beliefs nevertheless appear to be more



credible or more appealing for many individuals than older religious explanations of human origins. Such beliefs offer a view of human history imbued with a sense of the mysterious and purposeful presence of extraterrestrial intervention—we are not alone in the universe and our cosmic creators may return again someday, possibly to further guide us toward a techno-utopian golden age. The attraction of such ideas is related to the ways that ancient astronaut hypotheses reconcile religious and scientific explanations of human origins and history by providing a mythic narrative that appears as an outwardly secularized counterpart to creationism.<sup>14</sup> As traditional myths are reconfigured into this technological paradigm of the modern era, alien astronaut narratives fulfill the functions of myth by presenting an overarching explanatory framework for understanding the world and the nature of reality. The prehistoric astronauts are analogous to the gods and culture heroes of old, who created human beings for a reason; they are the source of world religions and mythology, bringers of culture and progressive technology, and interstellar benefactors intimately involved in the unfolding of human history. Just as the early UFO contactee narratives are a synthesis religious beliefs about heavenly savior beings with space age technology, ancient astronaut theories are a fusion of traditional religious narratives and technological reinterpretation, with UFOs as a seemingly scientific explanation for human development and history.

#### UFO RELIGIONS, APOCALYPSE, AND MILLENNIALIST MYTHOLOGIES<sup>15</sup>

Although ancient astronaut theories usually are presented as historically grounded and scientific (regardless of the underlying mythic creationist features), the ancient alien discourse has been spiritualized and integrated into the origin mythologies of numerous organized UFO religious movements, as might be expected. Much like the earlier Theosophically-suffused contactee accounts (and often influenced by them), the central tenet of many UFO religions asserts that extraterrestrials, as spiritually superior beings, have been invested in the human narrative from its beginning, visiting Earth throughout its history to offer evolutionary spiritual guidance. A number of these UFO cosmologies assert that the creation of human

<sup>14</sup> Andreas Grünschloß refers to ancient astronaut hypotheses as a “neo-mythic activity” that reflects the modern worldview in which “technological explanations, projected back into the past, serve as a disenchantment of old mythic accounts ... [but] the myths are themselves retained as basically ‘true’—however only in the modern ‘Astronauts’ sense” (Grünschloß, 2004: 432). In this regard, paleoastronaut mythologies are characterized by what István Povedák calls a “mythic openness,” which does not reject previous mythologies, but explains and remythologizes them by incorporating the older myths into its own UFO and ET interpretative framework (Povedák, 2019: 375).

<sup>15</sup> Although the term “UFO religion” is generally used to characterize religious movements that are based on some form of extraterrestrial contact, not all such movements involve direct contact with a UFO but may be inspired by channeled communications, telepathic messages, etc. A more accurate term for such movements might be “extraterrestrial contact religion”; the alternative term “ETI religion” (extraterrestrial-inspired religion) has been proposed by Thomas (2011: 6) as a more inclusive label.

beings and the spiritual progression of humankind are part of a cosmic plan, with the Earth considered a planetary classroom for universal teachings and the development of the soul. In this familiar schema, our guardians from outer space are currently intervening at a time of earthly emergency and they will continue to do so until the world is transformed and spiritual enlightenment is attained or the until Earth is ultimately destroyed.

In this confluence of beliefs about origins and endings, UFO creation myths are necessarily intertwined with UFO millennialist mythologies that explain the salvific role of extraterrestrials in the last days: space beings have been here from the start and are now appearing again for a specific reason at the end of time. The eschatological scenarios involving extraterrestrial intervention are wide-ranging, whether involving the rescue of human beings from apocalyptic catastrophes, the cataclysmic purification of the Earth and its transformation into a golden age of peace and harmony, or the spiritual perfection of human beings and the planet with alien guidance. These beliefs about the transformative promise of extraterrestrial encounters exemplify the concept of *millennialism* (also referred to as millenarianism), which is defined here as the expectation of imminent worldly transformation and collective salvation, to be brought about by divine or superhuman agencies, or by human beings working in accordance with a divine or superhuman plan.<sup>16</sup> The UFO eschatologies that emerged since the 1950s during a time of nuclear fear provide particular insights into the formation of millennialist belief systems in their melding of science and religion, while also illustrating three primary categories of Endtime thought: 1) *catastrophic millennialism*; 2) *progressive millennialism*; and 3) *avertive apocalypticism*.<sup>17</sup> In the pages that follow, these differing forms of apocalyptic and millennialist mythmaking will be examined as they are exemplified by the eschatological visions of several of the best-known UFO religious movements—Heaven’s Gate, the Aetherius Society, the International Raëlian Movement, and the Unarius Academy of Science.

UFO eschatologies, like other apocalyptic and millennialist mythologies, often appeal to a sense of loss and crisis, inspiring a yearning for a future perfect world that is free from suffering, evil, and injustice. In this way they resemble those creation myths that offer a vision of a previous period of perfection that once existed in a primordial time. In millennialist mythologies, the future golden age usually is envisioned as an entirely new world, although often it is the symbolic equivalent of a paradise lost that is projected into the future and occurring at the end of time. By comparison, in extraterrestrial eschatologies the millennial new epoch occasionally evokes a return to a paradise on Earth “before the fall of humankind,” an earlier era that is sometimes compared to the lost civilizations of Atlantis, Lemuria, and other imagined earthly utopias said to have been destroyed by human ignorance, violence, or atomic weapons. More frequently, the paradigm of millennial perfection

<sup>16</sup> This definition is based on Catherine Wessinger’s (2011b: 4–5) characterization of millennialism, which expands upon the earlier definitions offered by Cohn (1970: 15) and Talmon (1968: 349).

<sup>17</sup> See Wessinger’s (2011a) edited volume on millennialism for a thorough discussion and application of these categories.

involves a vision of spiritual and technological utopia as it exists on other, idyllic planets, which will be implemented on Earth in the future or attained in another celestial sphere.

In the initial flying saucer contactee accounts the alien savior beings usually are depicted as intervening in human history in order to avert nuclear catastrophe and other disasters. However, in some scenarios the destruction of the world is believed to be inevitable, with the chosen elect to be evacuated in spaceships before the apocalypse. UFO religions that center around a theology of impending apocalypse and planetary escape illustrate the specific pattern of belief recognized as *catastrophic millennialism* (also referred to as premillennialism), which is characterized by the expectation that there will be a cataclysmic transition to the millennial realm. Historically and cross-culturally, catastrophic millennialism has been the most frequent form of millennial belief, expressing a pessimistic view of humanity that regards the world as fatally flawed and unredeemable by human effort. Earthly or societal destruction is seen as imminent and inevitable, with the collective salvation of the righteous occurring through the intervention of otherworldly beings.<sup>18</sup> With regard to UFO religions, in some scenarios the Earth will be destroyed and transformed into a terrestrial paradise, which then will be repopulated with the chosen ones who were lifted off the planet prior to apocalypse. In other cases, the millennial kingdom will be attained on another planet or cosmic realm, as the Earth spins out of control.

One of the first UFO religions that overtly expressed catastrophic millennial beliefs involved a small group of devotees led by Chicago housewife Dorothy Martin in the 1950s, which became the subject of the well-known socio-psychological case study *When Prophecy Fails*. Martin conveyed channeled messages from the Space Brother Sananda (Jesus) and other Guardians from the planet Clarion, who warned of a massive apocalyptic flood that would destroy the world on December 21, 1954, and who promised to rescue believers and transport them to another planet prior to the apocalyptic cleansing of the Earth (Festinger, Riecken, Schachter, 1956).<sup>19</sup>

Relatively few subsequent UFO groups have specified exact doomsday dates, but similar prophecies of imminent catastrophe, a mass landing of saucers, and the planetary evacuation of believers have been a component in the development of various UFO religions, such as the online Ground Crew (Planetary Evacuation Organization) movement, the United Nuwaubian Nation of Moors, Fiat Lux, and Chen Tao (God's Salvation Church/God Saves the Earth Flying Saucer Association). As noted, the missives associated with the

<sup>18</sup> Of the numerous religious movements that have embraced catastrophic millennialist beliefs, a few of the best known are the Millerites, Peoples Temple, the Branch Davidians, Aum Shinrikyō, Melanesian "cargo cults," and various evangelical Christian denominations, particularly those influenced by pre-millennial dispensationalism.

<sup>19</sup> In response to the failed prophecy, Keech explained that because of the group's "spreading light" through their religious faith, the catastrophe had been prevented; in the aftermath, the most devoted members were said to have had a renewal of faith and worked zealously to further disseminate the messages from the space beings, which was famously interpreted as exemplifying the cognitive dissonance theory proposed by those researching the group (Festinger, Riecken, Schachter, 1956).

Ashtar Command have consistently predicted approaching global destruction, with the Command and its fleet of spaceships waiting in the wings to physically remove the chosen ones from the planet before the devastation begins.

Similar to other catastrophic millenarian scenarios, the apocalypse anticipated within these UFO religions often is conceptualized as a purification of the world, to be followed by an earthly paradise of peace, fulfillment, and harmony. Such Endtime evacuation plans resemble Christian Rapture beliefs about planetary escape prior to a period of worldly tribulation, although with differing criteria regarding those who will be saved. In some scenarios the selected ones will be members of a specific UFO group, or “star children” and “cosmic blends”: people whose ancestors mated with ancient aliens eons ago. In other eschatologies, the planetary evacuees will consist of those who are spiritually advanced or individuals with special abilities that will be useful in the millennial future.

Among those UFO religions that have embraced a catastrophic millennialist worldview, the Heaven’s Gate group has received the most attention, after thirty-nine of its members poisoned themselves in March, 1997, in the belief that doing so would transport them to a spacecraft that was traveling past the Earth. Their ritual suicide in a rented mansion in the gated community of Rancho Santa Fe, California, was a media event. The group was portrayed as a UFO “computer cult” of brainwashed devotees and sci-fi techno-millennarians many of whom were fans of *Star Trek* and the *X-Files*. Although dismissed in the media as mindless members of a “doomsday cult,” many of those involved were well-educated and middle-aged professional people, and as researchers have observed, the movement reflected aspects of broader American culture and religion, such as dissatisfaction with mainstream religion, spiritual searching, evangelical notions of sin and pervasive evil in the world, belief in conspiracies, and assault by demonic forces, among other things (Zeller, 2014).

Marshall Herff Applewhite and Bonnie Lu Nettles started Heaven’s Gate in the 1970s; they alternatively called themselves “Bo and Peep,” “Do and Ti,” and “the Two” (in reference to the Two Witnesses in the Book of Revelation). The cosmology of Heaven’s Gate consisted of a blend of ideas from the discourse of science and specific religious traditions, including American Protestantism, New Age mysticism, and Theosophy, although the movement declared itself to be scientific in orientation. The Two initially called the movement the Human Individual Metamorphosis. One of its primary teachings was that by overcoming human attachments and living an ascetic lifestyle a person may achieve an elevated evolutionary level “beyond human” and transform the body into a genderless, extraterrestrial form and ultimately be transported by a UFO to a higher realm to escape from a corrupt world (Wessinger, 2000: 233–234). Another central belief was related to the ancient astronaut hypothesis, for the creation mythology of the group maintained that extraterrestrials dwelling in the Kingdom of Heaven had planted human beings on Earth millions of years ago as a gardening experiment to grow souls (Balch, Taylor, 2003). On rare occasions representatives from this Kingdom visit the planet in flying saucers to gather or “harvest” the few exceptional souls that are spiritually evolved; and selected individuals

have been “tagged” to receive “soul deposits” in preparation for their transformation to a higher evolutionary level. Applewhite considered himself an extraterrestrial messenger from this higher evolutionary level who was incarnated into a human body (like Jesus who was an alien savior being as well), and whose mission was to collect the chosen ones and facilitate their graduation from the human realm by teaching them to overcome negative human instincts and attachments, ranging from sexual desires and materialistic tendencies to ties with family and friends (Zeller, 2014: 97–99, 147–155).

In the late 1970s, the nomadic group largely disappeared from public view, as its members embraced an ethos of austerity, social isolation, and spiritual perfection. Awareness of Heaven’s Gate resurfaced in May, 1993, after it placed an advertisement in *USA Today* which said this was the movement’s “final offer” to recruit the chosen ones before the end of the world. The message declared that societal institutions and mainstream religions were corrupted by adversarial Luciferian space aliens and that life on Earth was a failed project soon to be destroyed and “spaded under” because of humanity’s inability to evolve spiritually. Another attempt to recruit additional members through the Internet was unsuccessful as well, and interpreted by the group that its efforts were now futile and that it was time to leave an evil planet populated by people incapable of transcendence. This sense of hopelessness for humanity was conveyed by one group member: “The human world is a hideous hell due to all of the poor choices humans have made since the beginning of this civilization. If this is all there is with nothing to look forward to beyond this, then why choose to extend your time in this hell? [...] there is no place for us here. It is time for us to go home—to God’s Kingdom, to the Next Level. There is no place for us to go but up.”<sup>20</sup>

The passing of the Comet Hale-Bopp in late March, 1997, was viewed as a final prophetic sign that believers had been waiting for, offering the opportunity for planetary escape. Followers believed that the comet was being trailed by a spacecraft that would transport them to the “Evolutionary Kingdom Level Above Human.” Collective suicide was embraced as a means of evacuating a doomed world, a way to shed one’s physical body and ascend spiritually onto this Next Level spacecraft and the Kingdom of Heaven. Heaven’s Gate was not a typical UFO religious movement, yet its underlying Endtime mythos was not entirely unique, for it expressed the main features of the catastrophic millennialist belief system: a rigidly dualistic worldview, the belief that the world is irredeemably evil, that earthly catastrophe is inevitable, and that salvation of the chosen ones and the transition to a millennial kingdom will be facilitated by the intercession of superhuman beings.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> “Earth Exit Statement” by Glnody; Heavensgate.com website (<http://www.heavensgate.com/misc/exitgln.htm>).

<sup>21</sup> Wessinger identifies Heaven’s Gate as a “fragile millennial group” with features similar to other millennial groups with a dualistic worldview and authoritarian leadership, such as the Branch Davidians, Peoples Temple, and Aum Shinrikyō. These groups engaged in violence in an effort to preserve the religious ideals and ultimate concerns of the group, which were endangered by both internal stresses and external opposition from the broader society (Wessinger, 2000: 264–270).

While some UFO religious groups have embraced the catastrophic millennialist mythology of inevitable apocalypse and planetary escape, a more common eschatological view holds that extraterrestrial beings will help humanity avert disaster and transform the planet, healing societal crises, and ushering in a new age of peace and enlightenment. The belief that apocalypse may be prevented through spiritual actions illustrates the concept of *avertive apocalypticism*, a widespread yet infrequently studied pattern of millennial thought. Avertive apocalyptic beliefs assert that the end of the world is imminent, but not inevitable, and that worldly cataclysm may be avoided or forestalled if people respond to prophetic warnings and engage in spiritual and apotropaic practices. In some instances, these practices are believed not only to avert catastrophe, but are seen as redemptive actions that will result in collective salvation and the creation of a millennial age (Wojcik, 2011).

Avertive apocalyptic ideas characterized the early contactee movement, with the Space Brothers intervening in the attempt to prevent nuclear war. Among existing UFO religions, this avertive mythology is exemplified by the beliefs of the Aetherius Society. Headquartered in Hollywood, California, the Aetherius Society is one of the longest-lived organized UFO groups, founded by George King in the mid-1950s. Originally from England, King was a devoted practitioner of yoga who claimed to have achieved an enlightened state of Samadhi, and who said that he was contacted telepathically in 1954 by the Cosmic Master Aetherius from Venus who instructed him to be the voice of the “Interplanetary Parliament” and the primary channel for extraterrestrial communications transmitted by various Cosmic Intelligences. The messages from these Interplanetary Intelligences (also later referred to as the “Gods from Space”) warned of the imminent destruction of the world, which could be avoided if the menace of atomic weapons was eliminated and humanity could recognize its destructive tendencies and recover the religious wisdom of the past (King, 1961, 1996). The Earth was at a critical juncture, but salvation and worldly redemption was possible through prayer, spiritual practices, and the guidance of Cosmic Masters and Adepts, including Aetherius, Jesus, Buddha, Krishna, Count Saint-Germain, Mars Sector 6, Jupiter 92, and numerous other extraterrestrial beings and technologies, including Satellite No. 3, a spacecraft said to orbit the Earth and transmit spiritual healing energies to help avert disasters.

The elaborate belief system associated with the Aetherius Society that has developed over the years is based in a range of world religions and particularly the Theosophical tradition. It includes notions of karmic evolution, spiritual progression, and guidance by enlightened beings.<sup>22</sup> A stated core value of the Society is selfless service to others by working “in direct co-operation with the Gods from space to help bring about peace, healing and upliftment on Earth,” with the space gods said to have visited the Earth throughout human history, as ascended beings in the tradition of ancient astronaut beliefs. According to the group’s website, “Many of the world’s great spiritual teachers are in fact Cosmic Masters who have

<sup>22</sup> See Wallis 1974; Ellwood, Partin, 1995: 126–133; Rothstein, 2003; Saliba, 2003; Smith, 2003, for more extensive discussions of the Aetherius Society.

come to Earth from other planets. Examples include the Master Jesus, Sri Krishna, the Lord Buddha, Lao Zi, Confucius and Sri Patanjali. These spiritually advanced individuals have given of their otherworldly wisdom in different ways, at different times, in different places to help us to progress in our evolutionary journey back to the Divine Source from which we came.”<sup>23</sup> In cooperation with these and other extraterrestrials, the Aetherians are committed to saving the planet from annihilation and healing the “soul” of the world by engaging in Cosmic Missions that require the performance of rituals and the use of specially designed extraterrestrial technology. For example, Operation Prayer Power involves members performing specific mudras and directing their prayers and mantras into a “Spiritual Energy Battery,” an apparatus that stores concentrated spiritual power, which can then be discharged, in collaboration with the Masters, as a form of amplified psychic healing energy that is directed to specific locations in order to relieve human suffering and divert planetary catastrophes.<sup>24</sup> The Society asserts that its practices have prevented earthquakes and various natural disasters, as well as terrorist attacks, deadly viruses, the outbreak of war, and other calamities. The Aetherians have periodically engaged in specific avertive and earth-healing missions in cooperation with the Masters, such as Operation Sunbeam, performed to restore spiritual energy and karmic balance to Mother Earth, considered to be a sentient goddess who is in a state of ecological crisis because of the exploitative actions of humans (King, 1996: 124–126, 128).

The millennial views and avertive apocalyptic practices of the Aetherius Society also are interconnected with the group’s mythological narrative of the past, in which human failings, the misuse of technology, and nuclear war have resulted in the decimation of previous civilizations. The Aetherians’ cosmology traces the origins of human beings back to the extinct planet Maldek that once existed between Jupiter and Mars (its remnants now an asteroid belt), which was destroyed by the decline of its civilization into selfishness and the “lust for greater power,” and the resulting explosion of a hydrogen bomb (King, 2001: 13–14). As part of karmic law, the souls of those killed on Maldek were reincarnated on Earth, where they were to develop spiritually and technologically with the help of the planet’s original inhabitants, an advanced race called Adamic Man. In this creation mythology, the transplanted new earthlings progressed and eventually established the advanced civilization of Lemuria, but it also was destroyed by humanity’s warlike behavior, atomic weapons, and an eschatological battle between the benevolent Cosmic Masters and evil space beings. This scenario was repeated again a thousand years later in the case of ancient Atlantis which also was annihilated by a nuclear war, with some of its inhabitants rescued by flying saucers (King, 2001: 15–19). According to the messages channeled by King, humanity is once again on the verge of cataclysmic destruction, in a historical moment of decision that

<sup>23</sup> “Why the Aetherius Society?” Aetherius Society website (<https://www.aetherius.org/why-the-aetherius-society>); and “Cosmic Avatars,” Aetherius Society website (<https://www.aetherius.org/the-extraterrestrial-message/cosmic-avatars>).

<sup>24</sup> “What Do We Do?” Aetherius Society website (<https://www.aetherius.org/what-do-we-do>).

will either result in another atomic war or the creation of a New Order of planetary peace, prosperity, and enlightenment (ibid.: 17–19). The millennialist views of the Aetherians are thus rooted in a previous mythology of humanity's progression and destruction, a narrative of the past that provides a mythic template for understanding contemporary crises while reflecting the Cold War fears of nuclear annihilation that existed during the early years of the movement.<sup>25</sup>

The cosmology of the Aetherius Society also reflects the dualistic view of the world that characterizes most millennialist belief systems, with assorted accounts of the enduring cosmic battle between the Forces of Light (in the form of the extraterrestrial Masters and Adepts) and the powers of evil. These opposing evil forces that comprise the demonology in the Aetherian mythos not only have been responsible for the destruction of previous civilizations, but continue to attack the Earth in modern manifestations of earlier mythological demons, appearing in the science fiction-like forms of a malevolent alien android (identified as Satan), an evil planetoid (a meteorite possessed by a sinister intelligence), and an ant-like alien race, all of which have attempted to conquer Earth.<sup>26</sup> The Aetherius Society asserts that because of its avertive practices, the efforts of its leader George King, and the intercession of the Interplanetary Masters, these evil assaults have been thwarted. Again, the Aetherians emphasize that their rituals continue to be crucial in the fight against such threats and in achieving the goal of saving every soul on the planet and creating a millennial New Age. In this regard, the beliefs of the Aetherians also exhibit the features of *progressive millennialism* (also referred to as *postmillennialism*), in which it is maintained that collective salvation and a golden age may be achieved progressively by human beings acting in cooperation with a superhuman authority; this progressive millennialist view proposes a gradual spiritual perfection of humanity and does not include an apocalyptic scenario for the transformation of the world (Wessinger, 2011b: 5–6).<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, in its combining of avertive apocalyptic ideas and progressive millennial beliefs, the Aetherius Society's blend of eschatological visions may be considered to be an expression of *avertive millennialism*, a relatively new category of millennialism proposed in this context. Avertive millennialism expresses the belief that the performance of specific spiritual practices combined with extraterrestrial (superhuman) guidance will not only prevent earthly catastrophe, but also will bring about worldly salvation and a millennial

<sup>25</sup> See Rothstein, 2003, for a discussion of the relationship between the Aetherius Society's account of the past and its millenarian view of the present and the future.

<sup>26</sup> For a description of the evil aliens and accounts of their defeat, see King, 1961: 42–67; Saliba, 2003: 132–134, and "A Victory for the Forces of Light," American Headquarters of The Aetherius Society Blog Site (<https://aetheriusla.wordpress.com/2015/01/20/a-victory-for-the-forces-of-light>).

<sup>27</sup> Progressive millennialist views have been promoted in various contexts, exemplified by the nineteenth century Christian postmillennialists who preached the Social Gospel and emphasized social reform and the gradual transformation of the world into a millennial kingdom. Movements with progressive millennialist views that interface with UFO religions include Theosophy and various groups associated with New Age beliefs.



era of peace and perfection (Wojcik, 2011: 83–85). The concept of avertive millennialism seems especially appropriate in the analysis of the many UFO and alien-inspired religions in which beliefs about preventing apocalypse are coupled with the promise of a coming millennial paradise and collective salvation to be achieved in part through human spiritual effort. In contrast to catastrophic millennial views that regard apocalypse as inevitable and part of a divine plan, avertive millennialism expresses the faith that the world is not irredeemably evil or absolutely doomed, and that humanity, although flawed, is worthy of salvation. The salvific actions of believers are crucial in this transformational process for the gradual perfection of the world, as salvation is contingent upon progressive millennial human effort in league with superhuman mandates in the endeavor to create a millennial era.

The convergence of avertive apocalypticism, progressive millennialism, ancient astronaut creationism, scientific discourse, and techno-mythology finds full expression in the cosmology of the International Raëlian Movement, the largest UFO religion in the world, with membership estimates ranging from 50,000 to 100,000 individuals worldwide (Palmer, 2004: 120).<sup>28</sup> The movement has received international media attention for its support of human cloning research, and especially a project known as “Clonaid” which declared in 2002 that it had cloned the first human being. The concepts of cloning and genetic engineering are fundamental to the millennialist vision of the Raëlians as well as to its creation mythology, and regarded as the key to understanding the extraterrestrial origins and future of humanity. In a spiritualization of science and mythologizing of technology, advanced alien cloning techniques are envisioned as the means for human beings to attain immortality, and with the guidance of space beings, to create a utopian paradise on earth.

The movement was founded in 1973 by Raël (born Claude Vorilhon, 1946–) after his encounter with a four-foot tall space being with greenish skin named Yahweh. The diminutive humanoid gave Vorilhon a new name, Raël, and in this and subsequent encounters Raël was told that he was chosen as the prophet to explain the alien origins of life on earth and to inform humanity that it has entered into the “Age of Apocalypse” since the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. As with other avertive apocalyptic beliefs, the future of humanity was said to be at a crossroads, with the extraterrestrials telling Raël that human beings must decide whether to forbid the use of nuclear weapons and endeavor to make the transition to a new planetary consciousness or destroy the world in a nuclear war: “Humanity is now arriving at a turning point in its history, and its future depends only on itself. If you can control your aggressiveness towards each other and your environment, then you will reach a golden age of interplanetary civilization, in which universal happiness and fulfillment will be realized. If, on the other hand, your civilization gives way to violence, then it will destroy itself” (Raël, 2005: 150). Human technological development (e.g., space travel, computers, biotechnology, advances in medical science) and especially the detonation of

<sup>28</sup> Raël Press website (<https://www.raelpress.org/news.php?item.399>). See Palmer, 2004, for an in-depth analysis of the first three decades of the Raëlian movement.

atomic bombs alerted the extraterrestrials to the fact that humanity is now scientifically sophisticated enough to learn about its origins, prompting the aliens to return and warn of the dangers of atomic weapons, while offering the promise of planetary perfection.

In addition to their averted apocalyptic admonitions, the most significant message conveyed by the space beings, according to Raël, is that life on earth is not the result of the process of evolution nor is it the creation of a supernatural god. In the tradition of ancient astronaut hypotheses, Raël explains that human beings were created by extraterrestrials (in this case, from the aliens' own DNA) through cloning experiments in their laboratory on Earth, a barren planet that the alien scientists also populated with flora and fauna. The creation mythology of the Raélians is thus based in genetic engineering, a technology revered as the source of life and the origin of humanity, with the actions of the aliens being the primary influence on the nature of human existence and the history of humanity. As a self-proclaimed atheistic and "scientific religion," Raëlianism does not consider humanity's alien creators to be gods, offering instead what is referred to as an atheist Intelligent Design Theory:

Thousands of years ago, scientists from another planet came to Earth and created all forms of life, including human beings, whom they created in their own image. References to these scientists and their work can be found in the ancient texts of many cultures. Due to their highly advanced technology, they were considered as gods by our primitive ancestors and often referred to as 'Elohim' which in ancient Hebrew meant 'Those who came from the sky.'<sup>29</sup>

In a familiar ancient alien exegesis of the Bible's creation mythology, Raël says that the Bible has been misunderstood in conventional Christian theology, and he systematically reinterprets biblical references within the framework of flying saucer technology, advanced science, and ET intervention, while also considering the world's previous religious leaders and prophets to be human-extraterrestrial hybrids created and sent to Earth to help guide humanity.<sup>30</sup>

Raël also claims that he is the product of extraterrestrial interbreeding, and that his father was Yahweh who created him and other prophets through artificial insemination of an Earth woman taken aboard an Elohim spacecraft. Raël says he is the last of forty earth prophets sent to our planet. He claims that he has been bestowed with the mission to accomplish three things: spread the Elohim's messages; initiate the building of an embassy to officially welcome the arrival of Elohim; and organize the Raëlian movement to help transform humanity thereby fulfilling the millennial promise offered by the space beings.

<sup>29</sup> "Message from the Designers." International Raëlian Movement website (<https://www.rael.org/message>).

<sup>30</sup> Raël 1998: 26, 152, 2005: 164–165; "FAQ." International Raëlian Movement website (<https://www.rael.org/faq>). For further discussion of Raëlian creationism, cloning, and interpretations of the Bible, see Chryssides 2003; Helland 2007; Gallagher 2010.

Initially, it was asserted that the Elohim embassy had to be built in Jerusalem by the year 2025, in order for the Elohim and previous earth prophets (Jesus, Buddha, Moses, Muhammad, et al.) to return and meet with the world's political leaders in the effort to transform the planet. If this deadline was not met, the Elohim would not return, and the planet would be destroyed. More recent messages have moved this decisive date to 2035, and also have stated that Jerusalem is no longer the only location being considered for the building of the embassy, as the Raëlian millennial scenario has been extended in recent years.<sup>31</sup>

A distinctive aspect of Raëlian eschatology that exemplifies the movement's reverence for technology and science is its embracing of cloning as a way to achieve a type of eternal life and bodily resurrection. According to Raël, when the Elohim arrive on Earth they will share their advanced genetic engineering techniques, which will make possible the cloning of new bodies and allow people to download their individual personalities and memories into a computer and then transfer these directly into a new, young physical form. As Raël explains: "This process can be repeated indefinitely, moving from one cloned body of ourselves to another new cloned body. That is how the Elohim live for ever. That is why cloning is the key to eternal life" (Raël, 2001: 37). The centrality of cloning and genetics in the Raëlian mythology also is illustrated by a ritual called the Transmission of the Cellular Plan (also known as "Baptism") which involves the transmission of one's DNA to the Elohim who will use the DNA to clone duplicates of the faithful if they are worthy. This ceremony of immortality is performed during four annual Raëlian festivals through a process in which DNA codes are ritually replicated from the initiate's forehead by a Raëlian bishop and then recorded by the advanced technology of the Elohim for future cloning. In a related practice, Raëlians may sign a contract permitting a mortician to cut out a piece of frontal bone from one's forehead (the so-called "third eye") which is then frozen and can either be conveyed to the Elohim in order to attain lasting life or used by future human scientists in cloning procedures established in the coming millennial age.

In addition to saving themselves by being replicated through alien technology, the Raëlians work to save humanity by spreading the messages of Raël and advocating for the construction of the Elohim embassy that they believe will initiate the millennial transformation of the planet. Like the Aetherians, the Raëlian eschatological mythology thus expresses a combination of progressive millennialist and avertive apocalyptic ideas, placing emphasis on the gradual establishment of a utopian age on Earth with alien guidance while warning of imminent nuclear catastrophe and humanity's self-destruction that must be prevented. As is the case with other UFO religions, this avertive millennial dynamic between worldly cataclysm and the promise of salvation creates a sense of apocalyptic urgency which may produce an increased commitment and activity among members to disseminate the Raëlian messages for planetary transformation. Nonetheless, if nuclear apocalypse were to occur, Raëlians are assured that the Elohim will save the righteous by recording their genetic

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<sup>31</sup> "Elohim Embassy." Elohim Embassy website (<http://elohimembassy.org/embassy>).

codes and cloning new physical bodies on another planet in a technological reincarnation (Palmer, 2004: 93–96; Raël, 2005: 291–307).

In contrast to the eschatological visions of the Raëlians and Aetherians that combine the threat of possible catastrophe with the plea to avert it in an effort to initiate a golden era, a number of UFO religious movements embrace an overwhelmingly optimistic view of the future, in which the imminence of apocalypse is not a primary aspect of the Endtime scenario. Instead, these progressive millennialist beliefs emphasize notions of human progress and spiritual evolution, asserting that if human beings follow a cosmic plan prescribed by extraterrestrials, suffering and evil will be eliminated and a terrestrial paradise will be created. Perhaps the best-known UFO religious group that has promoted progressive millennialist views is the Unarius Academy of Science, located in El Cajon, California. The movement is one of the earliest UFO religions, created in the mid-1950s, like the Aetherius Society, during the formative years of the contactee movement. The group was founded by Ernest Norman (1904–1971) and Ruth Norman (1900–1993) who were the main channels for communications from various intergalactic beings as well as from deceased scientists from Earth, including Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein, and Nikola Tesla. The messages received from the Space Brothers and cosmic scientists expressed concern about atomic weapons, spoke of reincarnation on other planets, and conveyed assorted spiritual and scientific wisdom to help transform humanity. While individual spiritual transformation and self-healing is emphasized by the Unariuns, the larger millennial transformation of the world is central to their belief system; it will be brought about by the arrival of enlightened extraterrestrial beings with superior technologies.

The Unarius Academy of Science does not consider itself a religion, but instead a “science of life” (as the name of the group implies), claiming to offer a “fourth-dimensional” scientific belief system that explains the nature of the universe, the reality of past lives and rebirth on other planets, and the universal laws that will help humanity progressively evolve (Tumminia, 2005: 5–7). The rhetoric of science and technology infuses the Unariun mythos. While Unariun publications contain criticisms of organized religion, the same publications include discussions of Unariun spiritual progression, healing, visions, paranormal abilities, channeling, karma, and past life memories as these are related to specific energy frequencies and “scientific principles” (see Norman, 1956, 1960: 4–6; Unarius Academy of Science, N.d.: 4–7). Along with the references to science, physics, and energy systems that pervade the Unariun cosmology (i.e., teachings about the “physics of reincarnation” and the “psychodynamics of consciousness”), a mixture of ideas from the Spiritualist movement and Theosophy are interlaced throughout the Unariun mythos as well, which also includes matter-of-fact revelations about Ernest Norman being the reincarnation of Jesus and his wife Ruth being Mary Magdalene incarnate (see Norman, 1956, 1960: 4–6).

In the same way that science and extraterrestrial technologies are said to offer a path for future human progress and millennial perfection, Unariun creation mythology also is rooted in alien science and ET intervention, with human history explained in scientific terms

within the ancient astronaut framework. For example, the Space Brothers from Unarius, as scientifically superior beings, are believed to have periodically reincarnated on Earth to assist in humanity's evolution. The advanced civilization of Lemuria is said to have been established on Earth 150,000 years ago by eleven extraterrestrial super-scientists to bring further technological wisdom to the planet, the traces of which are reflected in ancient monuments, pyramids, and the lore about the lost continent of Atlantis (Norman, 1956, 1960: 208–209; Tumminia, 2005: 72–73).

A major component in the Unariun millennialist mythology as it developed involves the prediction of a mass space fleet of enlightened beings landing to help transform planet Earth. This momentous event will involve thirty-three spacecraft from the planets of the Interplanetary Confederation. Each spaceship will carry one thousand intellectually advanced beings. These starships will land one atop another, interlocking to form a two-mile high tower of space vehicles referred to as The Star Center that will serve as a university to teach humanity the science of Unarius (Unarius Academy of Science, N.d.: 13). Upon arrival, the Space Brothers will initiate a worldwide peace effort and their intergalactic technologies will cure diseases and eliminate other social ills. A golden age of peace and prosperity eventually will be established. With this progressive millennial transformation of humanity, the Earth finally will be advanced enough to join the other enlightened planets in the Interplanetary Confederation. In anticipation of this event, the Unariuns purchased property in the desert in San Diego County as a landing site for the spacecraft in order to welcome the interstellar beings. After several failed prophecies about the landing of the spaceships, and the death of both its primary visionary Uriel (Ruth Norman) in 1993 and her successor Antares (Charles Spiegel) in 1999, membership in the group has declined and millennialist themes appear increasingly subordinate to the teachings on self-healing and past-life therapy.<sup>32</sup> Still, personal spiritual transformation continues to be linked to a coming era of perfection in the group's millennial mythology, as explained on the "Welcome to Unarius" webpage: "Unarius provides the foundation for personal growth that will initiate a global transformation of consciousness, resulting in progressive planetary changes in the twenty-first century and beyond [...] a new golden age of logic and reason"<sup>33</sup>

Although the early publications by the Unarius Society express concerns about atomic weapons, the predominantly progressive millennialist mythology of the group stresses the beneficial power of atomic energy along with scientific knowledge and new technologies to alleviate human problems, coupled with the cosmic principles provided by extraterrestrial beings. Rather than emphasizing the imminence of worldly cataclysm, the Unariun eschatological vision focuses on the efforts of human beings working in harmony with the Space Brothers to establish a paradise on Earth. In contrast to catastrophic millennial

<sup>32</sup> See Tumminia, 2005, for an ethnographic case study of the Unarius Society and the Unariuns' responses to failed prophecies.

<sup>33</sup> "Welcome to Unarius." Unarius Academy of Science website (<https://unarius.org/index.php?page=welcome-to-unarius>).

worldviews, characterized by a pessimistic and tragic assessment of the world as irredeemably evil, progressive millennialist beliefs assert that earthly perfection is achievable through the incremental improvement of the world, an idea that has its secular equivalent in the notion of a utopia created through progress and human effort. Unlike catastrophic millennial scenarios in which the righteous are saved through superhuman intervention and the evil enemies destroyed in an apocalyptic cleansing, the progressive evolutionary view of the Unarius is less dualistic; it accepts all of humanity in its inclusive millennial embrace, promising that every individual eventually will achieve a state of enlightenment and immortality.

Even though these progressive millennialist beliefs place more emphasis on human agency in helping to achieve an ideal age, like other forms of millennialism, such ideas reflect an underlying deterministic view of the future in which history is seen as unfolding as part of a superhuman plan guided by otherworldly beings. In most extraterrestrial cosmologies the aliens deliver specific mandates that direct and determine the fate of humanity, as they oversee human history; they are said to have created human beings and assisted in the development of the human race, and now are conveying their directives for fulfilling a cosmic design that will transform the world. Human beings are viewed as relatively powerless and having contributed very little to the development of human history and culture, with humanity's major achievements attributed to alien intervention. In the mythologies of these UFO religions, it is usually asserted that the world's great cultural and spiritual leaders were either space beings or were influenced by extraterrestrials who have determined significant historical events and orchestrated the development of humankind. This sense of determinism is reflected in the explanations that aliens, not human beings, were responsible for the development of ancient civilizations, agriculture, and the construction of the world's architectural wonderments. In UFO eschatological scenarios, the future of planet Earth is dependent upon the arrival or guidance of these advanced beings. Furthermore, the salvation of humanity is possible only if human beings act in ways prescribed by these superior entities.

The UFO religions and extraterrestrial spiritualities discussed above share the common assertion that the universe is ordered, that a meaningful narrative underlies individual existence and human history, and that evil and suffering will be eliminated through the guidance of superhuman beings and the implementation of a godlike plan. Directly addressing fears of nuclear annihilation, environmental destruction, and other global threats, extraterrestrial eschatologies offer the promise of salvation and a utopian realm where death and suffering do not exist, and humans and other enlightened beings live in harmony and interplanetary peace. While UFO cosmologies provide systems of meaning for understanding the world and address issues of existential concern, the underlying core belief that humanity can be saved only by otherworldly beings may contribute to a sense of helplessness and a passive reliance on superhuman intervention to improve the world, and serve as a substitute for human efforts to confront the crises that face humanity today. On the other hand, the

progressive millennialist emphasis of some UFO belief systems may encourage a degree of social activism, with individuals working to overcome suffering and social injustice in the tradition of the postmillennial social reformists of the nineteenth century.

While UFO belief systems share commonalities with previous world mythologies, they are distinctive in their fusion of spirituality and science. Whether one examines the initial contactee accounts, the theories about ancient astronauts, or the vernacular theologies of UFO religions, ideas about technology and science are venerated and incorporated into the broader belief systems. In some instances, traditional religions are explicitly rejected as “superstition” or interpreted as a product of “primitive” human misunderstandings of the technologies and wisdom of alien beings. Science, in contrast, is embraced as a superior knowledge system of true wisdom and verifiable evidence that will transform humanity and help usher in a golden age. In this privileging of science and the merging of mythology and technology, the supernatural is supplanted by the extraterrestrial. The religious mysteries and sacred narratives of the past are reframed within the rhetoric of science and the otherworldly becomes technologized: the aliens are superhuman genetic engineers with omnipotent technology, a secularized counterpart to God; the Hindu *vimanas*, Ezekiel’s vision, and the accounts of other wondrous events in religious texts are re-read in terms of alien spacecraft and ET intervention; cloning is regarded as the source of the human race as well as a technology of resurrection and immortality; teachings about the fourth-dimensional science of life and the physics of reincarnation are modern updates of religious doctrines; and Spiritual Energy Batteries and transmissions from Satellite No. 3 are embraced as ways to avert planetary disasters, among the many other manifestations of UFO techno-mythologizing.

UFO religions and related ET-inspired spiritualities have been dismissed by some as idiosyncratic “cults” or an aberrant, irrational pseudoscientific phenomenon. Their scientized beliefs concerning worldly creation, apocalypse, and salvation offer insights, however, into the invention and development of contemporary mythologies as well as the formation of new religious movements. Resembling the myths of origins and endings that have existed historically and cross-culturally, UFO cosmogonies and eschatologies go further to mediate and reconcile religious and scientific worldviews, with the sacralization of the extraterrestrial providing a re-enchantment of the world within a seemingly scientific framework.<sup>34</sup> Emerging in the context of nuclear fear, technological advances, space exploration, and the authoritative discourse of science, ideas about the role of extraterrestrials in human history and in humanity’s future reflect the anxieties, hopes, and concerns of our

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<sup>34</sup> See Partridge, 2005, for a discussion of how UFO beliefs may re-enchant Western scientific rationalism. As Partridge notes, while UFO religions claim to offer scientific belief systems, many of the ideas about what constitutes science in UFO discourse are not the same as the notions accepted by the established scientific community, which generally categorizes such ideas as pseudo-science (Partridge, 2005: 183–185). For other discussions of the notions of science and religion in UFO subcultures and spiritualities, see Saliba, 1995: 49–50; Denzler, 2001: 106–107, 140–144; Zeller, 2010: 118–120.

era. Extraterrestrial cosmologies illustrate how new belief systems are created in response to societal concerns and technological changes, reflected and expressed at the level of vernacular belief. The historical development of modern UFO mythologies, triggered by Kenneth Arnold's initial account and then launched into an ever-expanding multitude of narratives and interpretative scenarios represents an extraordinary example of the power of the mythological imagination and the synthesis of scientific discourses and religious impulses in the twenty-first century.

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## MITOLOGIJE NLP: NEZEMELJSKA KOZMOLOGIJA IN MEDGALAKTIČNA ESHATOLOGIJA

*Za mitologijo letečega krožnika, ki je nastala v 50. in 60. letih prejšnjega stoletja, so značilne eksplicitno religiozne in mistične pripovedi, ki opisujejo stik z nezemeljskimi rešitelji. Ta prepričanja so se pojavila v času hladne vojne kot odgovor na razširjene strahove pred jedrsko apokalipso, ideje pa so privrženci NLP (naznani leteči predmeti) oblikovali v okviru poznanih ezoteričnih in folklornih tradicij, obenem pa so se opirali na t. i. tehnomitološke inovacije, ki vključujejo nebesna bitja, posrednike v kriznih časih. Ob eshatoloških temah, povezanih z NLP, ki objljujejo svetovno rešitev ali planetarni pobeg, so se kmalu razvile mitologije o paleoastronavtičnem ustvarjanju. Ponazarjala so jih priljubljena prepričanja o »starih astronautih«, ki skozi celotno človeško zgodovino usmerjajo napredek civilizacije na Zemlji. Starodavne tujerodne ideje na neki način sintetizirajo diskurze znanosti in duhovnosti, reinterpretirajo nadnaravne zgodbe v svetovnih mitologijah, ki so jim izhodišče posegi nezemljanov in njihovih naprednih tehnologij; na drugi strani pa to priča o sekularizirani kreacionistični mitologiji človeškega izvora in zgodovine. V*

*razpravi avtor sledi izvoru in razvoju zgodnjih mitov o NLP ter predstavlja študije primerov več dobro poznanih verskih skupin NLP. Analizira mitske vidike njihovih sistemov prepričanj s posebnim poudarkom na apokaliptičnih, tisočletnih scenarijih. Različne eshatološke pripovedi, značilne za religije NLP, ponujajo pogled v ustvarjanje tisočletnih tradicij kot tudi v primarne oblike milenaristične misli.*

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