UFOs: THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION

Fifteen million adult Americans claim to have had at least one experience with an Unidentified Flying Object (UFO), and the phenomenon’s wide impact on our culture is testified to by the exotic display of titles on drugstore and airport bookracks, the plot line in many science fiction novels, popular movies, TV documentaries, and UFO research groups scattered around the world. An expression of our modern culture, the phenomenon is ripe for scholarly interpretation.

Over the last decade there have been several different attempts to link UFOs with religion, but none of these have sought to make a serious phenomenological and theological analysis, as I plan to do here. The method I intend to employ for studying the subject is a hermeneutic of culture. Although originally referring to the interpretation of literature, the term “hermeneutic” more recently is being applied to the interpretation of all forms of cultural expression. A hermeneutic of culture proposes to interpret cultural expression in such a way as to bring its depth and dynamic into clearer focus. The method follows Langdon Gilkey’s hermeneutic of secular experience. Drawing upon Heidegger’s hermeneutical phenomenology, this approach seeks to uncover and reveal the latent religious dimensions or meanings of contemporary experience—i.e., to unveil the structures of man’s being-in-the-world not evident to the immediate or ordinary level of understanding.

UFO sightings are ostensibly a part of secular experience; they are seldom designated directly as “religious.” However, it is my thesis here that the UFO phenomenon presents us with a scientized myth. It is myth because it seeks to create an organized world of meaning anchored in a reality transcendent to the ordinary mundane existence of earth. It is scientized because our deeper inner religious intentions are frustrated by the lack of contemporary language capable of communicating transcendent...
en, because of this, today’s religious concern for the infinite and eternal is compress to the naturalistic and scientific framework of the finite and temporal. The UFO, therefore, presents us with a case of religious sublimation.

The thesis of this article does not depend on the factual or objective reality of UFOs in themselves. For the sake of this study we will suspend or bracket out the question of the physical reality of the flying machines. Most researchers are exclusively concerned with proving whether or not UFOs in fact are real and come from intelligent life in outer space. Some other researchers, especially the social scientists, assume the non-factuality of UFOs and concentrate only on the social and psychological dynamics. For my own part, I see no reason to reject the extraterrestrial hypothesis out of hand. However, for the sake of this study, we will temporarily suspend commitment.

We will concentrate here on the phenomenon of witnessing or encountering a UFO. This of course includes the subject’s personal interpretation of the experience, along with the eidetic structure* of the object (allegedly) experienced. Our examining of the experiencing subject will take us into the fields of sociology and psychology; and our eidetic analysis of the symbolic role UFO’s play for the individual or even our whole culture will take us into the field of religion. Studied in this way, UFOs may tell us something important about how we in the modern world of science understand (or misunderstand) reality.

Sociological and Psychological Studies

Sociological and psychological analyses of the impact of the UFO phenomenon on our culture have been attempted, but for the most part their skimpy research and premature reductionism have added little of value to our understanding of the matter. Nevertheless, we may borrow liberally from them in making our own analysis.

One oft-cited sociological study is that of Donald I. Warren (1970), which resulted in the “status inconsistency theory of flying saucer sightings.” Warren’s study links three variables: (1) a social condition of status discontinuity, producing (2) a psychological state of marginality, resulting in (3) a form of individual alienation that expresses itself in a partial rejection of the individual’s own social position and a partial rejection of society’s evaluation. In short, psychic tension causes deviant behavior and a UFO experience is an expression of such deviancy.

Warren interviewed no one while gathering evidence for his theory. Rather, he examined a 1966 Gallup Poll and drew correlations between questions pertaining to UFOs and questions pertaining to social status. A status inconsistent individual is one whose income, education, and occupation are incongruent with each other in terms of the norms of society. A black physician, for example, is status inconsistent because blacks are supposed to be poor and physicians well-off. Similarly a wealthy Catholic and die maker would be status inconsistent. Status inconsistent people have a sense of alienation, lack of power to affect events in larger society, and unclarity over what they should believe. Warren’s study pointed out that there is a positive correlation between status inconsistency and UFO sightings per se, as well as in the belief that UFOs come to us courtesy of extraterrestrial intelligent life.

In drawing conclusions from this data, UFO sightings are linked to status frustration. UFOs provide a way to “escape” the system into unrealized and perhaps unrealizable consistent situations. Those who have had a UFO experience believe, consciously or unconsciously, that it represents “the possibility of change,” or transformation, or opportunity.

Not everyone has appreciated the Warren study. Warren’s reliance exclusively on the Gallup Poll interviews weakens the force of his argument. J. Allen Hynek, Northwestern University Astronomer and nineteen year consultant on UFOs to the U.S. Air Force, sharply criticizes the Warren thesis. He contends that many people he personally interviewed—airline pilots, policemen, clergymen, housewives, politicians—did not give evidence of tension caused by such inconsistency. On this point, based on my own experience interviewing those claiming to have seen a flying saucer, I tend to agree with Hynek. President Jimmy Carter in the presence of twenty other witnesses saw three UFOs one evening; and regardless of what his Republican detractors believe, he certainly feels he belongs in the job. However, let us take note of one general point in the Warren study—namely, the hypothesis that there is an association between psychic tension and UFOs. After all, psychic tension came from quarters other than status-inconsistency, and this point could prove helpful as we move along.

Another approach to UFOs has been offered on occasion by psychologists of the analytic tradition. Here, as one might easily predict, UFO experiences are the result of displacement. The unconscious emotional and mental processes of schizophrenics, antisocials, psychopaths, and borderline personalities are displaced from their normal objects and projected into a world of fantasy. For example, two psychiatrists, Lester Grinspoon and Alan Persky, write that “... a population of emotionally disturbed people is more likely than a nondisturbed population both to be attracted to the possibility that we are being visited by extraterrestrial forms of intelligent life and to make observations that support this possibility.” In other words, UFOs are seen by kooks and nuts.

Such an approach tends to be blatantly reductionistic, assuming that

* By “eidetic” structure I am referring to a system of cohering meanings that are implied in the structure of the phenomenon as a whole.
UFOs are completely fantasy from beginning to end. Images of extraterrestrial visitations are hallucinations, representing "the projection onto the outer world of such inner needs as wish-fulfillment, enhancement of self-esteem, censure, a sense of guilt, or self-punishment." This list of the blacker inner emotional needs of the unconscious is no doubt trundled out by psychiatrists whenever displacement and projection are discussed. In such a framework there is nothing unique about our psychic relation to UFOs, and UFOs themselves are not studied because it is presumed that they are just one projected fantasy among many, "reality is reshaped to make it synchronous with the emotional needs of the delusional person."  

Even more predictably, our two psychiatrists describe UFOs as projections issuing from frustrated and sublimated sexual desires; they are symbolic of the breast and the penis. Our researchers say they have examined "typical pictures" of UFOs, which are either "saucer-shaped or cigar shaped"—i.e., either breastlike or phalluslike objects. UFOs can therefore be understood as projected symbols of our highly libido-infused primary inclinations toward gratification (child sucking mother's breast) and omnipotence (virility). 

This explanation deserves comment. First, there is only a finite number of shapes UFOs—real or unreal—could in principle have. After round and rectangular (cylindrical), there are only a few other possibilities left—e.g., square, triangular, hexagonal. In fact, flying saucer reports describe objects of forty or more particular shapes, including the triangular. Second, this theory of displacement says too much. There are far too many items in our daily life with round or cigar shapes; how do we decide which are and which are not functioning as objects for our sublimated inner sexual needs? Does it mean that whenever we suck on a symmetrically shaped ice cream cone we are secretly returning to our mother's breast? Does a plumber who works daily with long narrow pipes choose his profession because he is insecure about his virility? And, thirdly, if this sublimated shape theory is to be taken seriously, should we not expect a bit more precision? Should not Unidentified Flying Breasts always travel in pairs? 

Grinspoon and Persky do make a contribution to this present study, however, in emphasizing a relation between UFOs and psychic stress: 

In times of severe stress, either from the environment or from intra-psychic conflict, man reverts or regresses, falls back on more primal modes of thinking. Often when the challenge is severe, when science and religion are undeveloped, unavailable, or seem of little assistance, then the magical and the mythical explanation is utilized ... this increase (in psychological disorders) is to some extent a consequence of the increasingly anxious times in which we live. 

In addition to the role of stress in these "anxious times," note how it is said that "undeveloped" science and religion lead to the "magical and the mythical." As we proceed, I will suggest that undeveloped religion does in fact express itself in UFOs, not as magical but as scientific myth. 

One more point before we leave Grinspoon and Persky. They go on to say that stress or frustration may represent a denial of the finite nature of life. Since fear of dying can produce stress, our unconscious concern for death and desire for immortality come to expression symbolically in the belief that UFOs are extraterrestrial. I agree. In many cases UFOs are pictured as being driven by visitors from a world transcendent to earth and characterized by longevity in the hundreds or thousands of years. Hence, they represent a change, an opportunity to overcome the finite bounds and anxieties of our present existence and escape to a new and better world which is "eternal." 

One psychological study of considerable integrity is offered by the seasoned scholar of the inner mind, Carl Jung. In Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Sky (1950) Jung describes UFOs as a visionary humor with its roots in psychic and social stress. As we have done here, Jung stands neutral on the question as to whether or not flying saucers exist as a physical reality, but he maintains that the world-wide scale of this visionary humor makes UFOlogy an important scholarly concern. "The basis for this kind of humor is an emotional tension having its cause in a situation of collective distress or danger, or in a vital psychic need. This condition undoubtedly exists today, in so far as the whole world is suffering under the strain of Russian policies and their still unpredictable consequences." 

In addition to the cold war, Jung suggests that the prodigious increase of the world's population and the growing awareness of insufficient resources to support mankind also contribute to this emotional tension. "Congestion creates fear, which looks for help from extra-terrestrial sources, since it cannot be found on earth." Such psychic tension issues in the unconscious call for a Messiah to deliver us from our impending catastrophe. Jung writes, "The present situation is calculated as never before to arouse expectations of a redeeming, supernatural event." 

Jung recognizes that this collective psychic disposition may even precipitate seeing things which are physically unreal. "Even people who are entirely compus mentis and in full possession of their senses can sometimes see things that do not exist." Note, however, that for Jung flying saucers, even if an illusion, do not appear only to kooks, schizophrenics, or borderline personalities. Even the compus mentis may witness one because the conditions in the wider culture are ripe for it. 

Drawing upon his theory of archetypes, Jung says that the circular shape of the flying saucer is a symbol of God. The disc or sphere, referred to by its sanskrit name, mandala, unconsciously represents totality and harmony. The shape is common throughout the world's religions, and in Christendom this symbol of perfection appears in the form of the halo.
Hence, circle-shaped flying saucers are demythicized gods. Although Jung's theory that the mandala-shaped UFOs represent divinity (instead of the breast) is helpful, in itself it says too much. First, UFOs have shapes other than the circle, even though the so-called "saucer" is the most prevalent. Second, we are confronted with countless circles every day. Does a man take a job doing tire repair or donut making just to be close to God? Hardly. A circular shape does not in itself make UFOs a religious phenomenon. However, if we discover that the shape seems to function in concert with other elements in the eidetic structure, then perhaps we will have located a genuine unconscious religious symbol. And in the case of UFOs, I believe we have such a symbol at work.

Jung makes one point that is crucial for our analysis—that UFOs reflect the naturalistic and scientific horizon of our modern self-understanding. He believes that the universal mass rumour of UFOs could occur only in our enlightened, rationalistic and scientific age. There is a universal or archetypal religious structure to UFOism which can find only sublimated expression in a non-religious culture. He speaks fatalistically of the desperate attempts to retrieve our Christian faith, because we cannot get back to that limited world-view which in former times left room for metaphysical intervention. Belief in this purely natural world and the technological power of man have become a practical and, for the time being, irrefragable truth. Our universal religious inclinations, therefore, remain unconscious and are permitted to express themselves only in ways acceptable to the modern worldview.

This attitude on the part of the overwhelming majority provides the most favourable basis for a projection, that is, for a manifestation of the unconscious background. Undeterred by rationalistic criticism, it thrusts itself to the forefront in the form of a symbolic rumour, accompanied and reinforced by the appropriate visions, and in so doing activates an archetype that has always expressed order, deliverance, salvation, and wholeness. It is characteristic of our time that, in contrast to its previous expressions, the archetype should now take the form of an object, a technological construction, in order to avoid the odiousness of a mythological personification. Anything that looks technological goes down without difficulty with modern man. The possibility of space travel makes the unpopular idea of a metaphysical intervention much more acceptable.

Thus in Jung we see that psychic tension, reflecting a sense of powerlessness in the face of pressures brought by modern civilization and a need for divine intervention from above, can find thematic expression only in forms that are shaped and twisted by the worldview of natural science.

One more psychological study is of interest to us here. Its results confirm not only that UFOs draw out one's inner desires for a celestial guardian or savior, but also that the image we have of the UFO is not anti-scientific or anti-rational. This study is a 1975 Masters dissertation by Stephen P. Resta at Loyola College, Baltimore, titled, "The Relationship of Anomie and Externality to Strength of Belief in Unidentified Flying Objects." It is a psychological survey employing tests such as the Lowe Anomie Scale, the Rotter I-E scale, and a UFO opinion questionnaire.

Resta uses the term "externality" to characterize individuals who feel they are powerless to control their destiny. In other words, the control of their lives is external, not internal. Highly externalized persons believe that they are at the mercy of their environment, that they are being manipulated by others. Events in their lives are perceived as happening to them by luck, chance, fate, or the decision of others more powerful than they. They are in sharp contrast to the internalized individual who feels that she can exert control over her destiny.

Resta's survey showed a strong positive correlation between externality and belief in UFOs. Recall how Carl Jung argued that modern people, uncertain about their individual and collective future, are quite apt to believe readily in UFOs as a source of salvation. Resta writes, "The most evident observation to be made is that individuals who feel they are incapable of controlling their lives tend to possess a strong belief in the existence of UFOs."

The other factor studied was anomie, a word first used by Durkheim to refer to individuals who felt estranged or alienated from the norms of the wider society. An anomie person is one who is supposedly ambivalent about societal values, making him or her unable to obtain emotional satisfaction in conventional ways. In extreme cases, anomie may indicate a loss of orientation in experience, loss of the sense of reality, and loss of personal identity.

Anomie is also closely identified by some social scientists with an inclination toward such things as spiritualism, necromancy, astrology, and the prophetic portent of signs and wonders. Resta quotes such an identification of an anomie person as one who is "attracted by magical, rather than rational and scientific explanations."

Resta began his study with the hypothesis that there would be a strong correlation between anomie and belief in UFOs. And why not? Establishment scientists and other skeptics write off UFO witnesses and believers as "kooks"; they see UFOism as just another pseudo-science along with astrology, spiritualism, and psychokinesis. Much to Resta's surprise, however, he found no correlation between feelings of anomie and belief in UFOs.

The most important interpretation of this finding, I conclude, is that to a large extent UFO believers are part and parcel of the modern scientific mentality. Yes, they do want a celestial savior, but that savior will not by mysterious; instead, he will be fully comprehensible and scientifically explainable according to the laws of nature.
A Case Study: Dick Jackson

The number of reported UFO experiences is legion. Before the U.S. Air Force ceased studying the matter in 1969, it had a file of more than 25,000 cases. A 1974 Gallup Poll showed that 15 million adult Americans claim to have witnessed a UFO. We must do some selecting.

We can narrow the field a bit by passing up simple daytime fly-bys, nocturnal lights, and radar trackings. For our purposes it would be best to focus upon "close encounters of the third kind," a category provided by J. Allen Hynek, wherein the witness allegedly confronts at least one being associated with a landed UFO. This is usually the most intense of the reported UFO experiences and produces the most complex forms of interpretation.

Third kind close encounters include all of the famous contacts of the 1950's and 60's on the lecture circuit spoke to rather large audiences around the world: George Adamski, Daniel Fry, Truman Bethurum, Howard Menger, George van Tassell, Gabriel Green, Buck Nelson, and Orfeo Angelucci. It would also include alleged contacts with extraterrestrials that have led to overtly religious organizations—e.g., the Aetherius Society, Understanding Incorporated, the Ministry Of Universal Wisdom, Inc., and the Church of Jesus the Saucerman.

Somewhat arbitrarily, yet with an eye to its exemplary structure, I have chosen here to examine the report of Dick Jackson. This is not a famous case; Jackson, who has been given only minimal newspaper coverage, is not on lecture tour nor is he associated with any religious cult. He is a humble man who seeks no publicity and simply feels he fell victim to the situation. In this he perhaps better represents the more general response to the influence of UFOs on our culture.

Dick Jackson is a mechanic living in a trailer camp with his son near Fort Meyers, Florida. His close encounter of the third kind occurred about 2:00 a.m. on October 17th, 1975. He was tossing and turning restlessly in bed and his arthritis was bothering him. After getting up and going outside, he began walking toward a palm tree which stood some twenty feet from the door of his trailer. He remembers being about half way to the palm—then he blacked out.

When he came to, he found himself standing at the foot of a short stairway leading up to the doorway of what he called a "flying saucer." He described the saucer as round and dome-shaped with a humanoid standing in the doorway. The spaceman motioned for Mr. Jackson to come up and enter the craft. As he climbed the three steps or so to the door platform, the man spoke in perfect English, saying, "Do not be alarmed. No harm will come to you. We just want to talk with you."

In my interview with Mr. Jackson, I asked what he meant by "perfect" English. He said that throughout the subsequent conversation the saucer's occupant showed no regional accent—i.e., he spoke neither as a "southerner" nor a "northerner," and did not use contractions such as "ain't." Mr. Jackson himself, who was quite articulate, spoke with proper grammar, seemed qualified to judge good English when he heard it.

When Mr. Jackson walked through the door of the craft, he noticed that he did not have to bend to fit. "I am 6'4 1/2"; I know a doorway is tall when I do not risk bumping my head."

As he entered the craft, he said he felt as though a suction action was at work over his whole body. He told a local newspaper reporter, "I had the feeling I was being vacuum cleaned—sterilized I guess. Hell, I'm probably pretty well sterilized anyway. I'm at the age where you're sterilized."

Jackson is 55.

Inside the spacecraft he saw two men. Although they spoke with each other in a foreign language, only one spoke to Mr. Jackson and always in English. Mr. Jackson said he was familiar with Spanish and French, but what they spoke to each other was different.

Stressing that the craft's occupants were not monsters or little green men, Jackson told me they looked basically like the Caucasians we know here on earth, although the one who spoke to him had a dark complexion—"like an Italian"—and had a dimple on his chin. He looked like he might be 65 years old, but Jackson was told that he was much older than that. Both men were shorter than Jackson, who estimated their height at 5'2".

The inside of the round cabin was about 24 feet in diameter and very plain, with a control panel on the wall to the left. There was no furniture except a desk or table, behind which sat the host who had earlier beckoned Jackson to come in.

The second man stood to Jackson's right, and as Jackson entered he opened and closed a panel in the wall revealing some wires. The panel was part of a cover or rib which circumscribed the craft. And Jackson, noticing the wire in the form of a field winding such as one would find in an electric motor, speculated that maybe the whole ship served as an armature. Jackson's first question was: how did the ship operate? The host responded, "The best I can describe it to you is: this is a generator and battery sitting on top of an electric motor." He also said that the flying saucer occasionally borrowed power from earth, but he did not specify whether or not that power was electricity.

After reassuring Jackson a second time, the spaceman described how for a number of years his people have been preparing a presently uninhabited planet for colonization by earthlings. This would not be the home planet of these two visitors; they came from "Plantech," and the name was spelled out. Their own habitat was described as technologically advanced far beyond the present stage of earth's evolution that we appear backward in comparison.

The picture of the future abode of earthlings who would choose to
emigrate to the new world was a picture, in Jackson's words, of "utopia." On this plan for the transplanted earthlings would be new in many ways. There would be plenty of wealth for everybody; competition would be unnecessary. There would be no need of money as we know it, because all things would be shared. Everyone's mental attitude would be different; they would live in peace, with no more crime or hunger. No work would be required, but if one felt the need to make a contribution, rewarding work would be made available. No one would get bored.

The spaceman called Dick Jackson by name even though, as Mr. Jackson emphasized to me, they had exchanged no introductions. He has no idea how the spaceman learned his name. The space visitor then asked Jackson if he would serve as a recruiter to encourage colonization of the new planet by earthlings.

Jackson responded by announcing that he was in poor health and would not be a fit recruiter for much longer. Jackson had been told by his physician in 1971 that he had only two years yet to live. He was suffering from severe conditions of arthritis, emphysema, and myocarditis. At that time he was living in close proximity to a refinery in Texas, and his doctor told him that he might lengthen his life by moving to an area with cleaner air. Jackson had then moved to Florida, the state of his birth, where he was still living at the time of this encounter four years later.

I asked Jackson if the thought of his imminent death weighed on him continuously. "Oh no!" he quickly responded in a tone of excessive confidence, "I've beaten it now." When I asked him what he meant by the obviously ambiguous phrase, "beaten it," he said he was referring to the fact that he had outlived the doctor's prediction. When I pressed him further, he conceded that he had been very upset when he first received the news, but that now he does "not think of it at all." I was puzzled. Why would the spaceman's question about recruitment trigger a response about Jackson's health? Does Jackson think more about his poor health than he likes to admit? Or, has Jackson suppressed his fear of dying to such an extent that he no longer knows consciously that he is afraid?

What the spaceman said in response is fascinating. In return for recruiting, the astronaut stated that Jackson would be cured of his illnesses and be permitted to join the first group of immigrants to the new world. "He said my perfect health would be restored!" Jackson told the spaceman he would be interested.

It was stressed that the emigrating earthlings would not be able to take their possessions on earth with them. "The people who went would go without anything but the clothes on their back," Jackson explained, "because everything would be furnished there." He said that no metal could be taken, even in the form of buttons, zippers, or jewelry. This theme of forsaking everything in this world in order to enter a new and better world reminded me of Jesus laying down the requirements of full commitment for entry into the Kingdom of God. To the rich young ruler, I recalled Jesus had said, "go, sell what you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven." (Mark 10:21)

I asked Jackson about religion. He described himself as not a religious person. He had gone to Sunday School as a child but seldom to church as an adult. Religion is good for children, he believed, and ethics are necessary for most people, but he personally did not take religion seriously. He could not picture God as most people do—which he meant as "an old man with a white beard." To a reporter he said he was not superstitious and that he does not "believe in ghosts, because I've never seen one. Show me one and I'll believe in them."

When the conversations with the spaceman were completed, Jackson left the craft and watched it depart: "Then, all of a sudden—poof—the ship was accelerating so fast..." Jackson said the spaceman told him he would be contacted at some future date regarding recruitment plans, but as of my interview in February 1976 the second contact had not yet been made.

The case as presented here would seem to indicate that Mr. Jackson's UFO encounter is the work of a dream, the psychological projection of unconscious inner needs. However, we do not know this for a fact, nor need we know for certain whether or not it actually happened as he described it. More important than the cause of the experience is its interpretive structure.

The structure tells us we have here the frustrated expression of profound inner needs. These are needs which for our ancestors in earlier centuries were met by religion. For the generations that went before us, the fear of death could be to a considerable extent overcome by recalling the promise of eternal salvation through Christ. Most men and women today are deprived of this comfort. The meaning of life in our modern world must be found within the constrictions of a natural and finite universe, wherein death is the natural yet absolutely final end to life and the meaning of life. Something within Dick Jackson is rebelling, wishing for something that escapes the finite bonds of earth and human death.

Covert Religious Structures

I believe we can identify at least four interrelated elements of religious symbolism that constitute the eidetic structure of the UFO for Mr. Jackson and countless other witnesses. The flying saucer symbolizes transcendence, omniscience, perfection, and redemption.

First, transcendence. The symbolic quality of transcendence native to UFOs is due to their obvious association with the sky, with heaven, with the mathematical infinity of outer space. Infinity fills us with a sense of awe and holiness.

Almost every primitive culture has had a belief in a god of the sky who...
created the earth and who sustains it by pouring out the life-giving rain upon it. The African Ewe tribe says, “There where the sky is, God is too.” The name "God" to the supreme divinity of the Maori peoples is Iho, which means "elevated, high up." The ancient Chinese word Ten means both "heaven" and the "god who rules heaven." The mighty warrior gods such as Zeus, Thor, Indra, and Indra were gods of the sky. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew God is often referred to as El-Elyon, "The Lord Most High." At Jesus' birth the angels sang, "Glory to God in the highest."

The "high" is something inaccessible to us mortals as such. Thus the heavenly realms so far beyond our reach become invested with the divine majesty of the transcendent, of absolute reality, of everlastingness. Heaven naturally belongs to superhuman powers and beings. As Mircea Eliade has written, "... even before any religious values have been set upon the sky it reveals its transcendence. The sky 'symbolizes' transcendence, power, and changelessness simply by being there. It exists because it is high, infinite, immovable, powerful."  

Even in the modern world the sky has not lost its ability to communicate the transcendence and majesty of the divine creator. One of the interesting byproducts of the U.S. Man in Space program has been a stimulation of religious consciousness in the astronauts. Frank Borman, who was on the first orbit of the moon in 1968 and is now a space manager, said that in the vast regions of space he saw "evidence that God lives." Former astronaut James B. Irwin claimed his visit to the moon constituted a "spiritual awakening" for him of such intensity that in 1972 he founded an evangelistic organization known as "High Flight." In 1975 William R. Pogue, one of the three crewmen of Skylab 3 which set a record of 84 days in space in 1973, resigned from the Space program to join the staff of High Flight.

Because flying saucers are seen primarily in the sky, it is no accident that they have picked up religious connotations. Through science, however, we know that the sky we see is made up primarily of atmospheric phenomena that represent only a thin envelope enwrapping our planet. Conceptually, we are aware that the sky is relatively local and that real transcendence is to be found in the millions of light-years that separate us from other stars and galaxies. Outer space transcends the clouds, and even the sun. UFOs are capable of embodying and transmitting this conceptual notion of transcendence as well, because it is held by many that they have traversed the unfathomable distances from other civilizations to earth. Gods of the local sky, such as Amen-Re or Zeus or Thor, no longer impress us. But UFOs come from the furthest reaches of our imagination, from near-incalculable distances in outer space.

Second, omniscience. How did the spaceman know Dick Jackson's name? They had never been formally introduced. Jackson did not volunteer the information; the alien astronaut simply knew it.

One interesting feature consistent in the contactee accounts is the near omniscience of the space people, due not to old-fashione...
This is reminiscent not only of St. Augustine but also of the Psalmist’s prayer, “Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts.” (Psalm 139:23) To have such personal knowledge of us the spaccmen must love and care for us. They tell Orfeo, “we feel a deep sense of brotherhood toward Earth’s inhabitants.” In stressing God’s love and continual care for his children, Jesus says, “even the hairs on your head are numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.” (Matthew 10:30f)

What is missing in a world that is understood strictly in terms of the sterile and impersonal laws of nature is the abiding presence of God’s spirit. We do not want to be alone. In the old-time religion we could count on angels as God’s invisible agents to watch our every move and protect us from danger. God’s omniscience and heavenly angels met a deep inner religious need then. To be told by modern natural science that angels do not exist is a great loss.

But with UFOs angels are back again, not as spirits but as physical beings, with electronic surveillance and telepathic insight. It is comforting to know once again that we are not alone. Someone is watching.

Third, perfection. The shape of Dick Jackson’s flying saucer was round. Could this be a mandala, an unconscious symbol of the divine? Carl Jung writes, “There is an old saying that ‘God is a circle whose center is everywhere and the circumference is nowhere.’ God in his omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence requires a totality symbol par excellence, something round, complete, and perfect. Epiphanies of this sort are, in the tradition, often associated with fire and light. On the antique level, therefore, the UFO’s could easily be conceived as ‘gods’.”

Perhaps the round dome-shaped vehicle unconsciously represents the need to have God come into Jackson’s life. Could this be a hierophany, a revelation of the sacred? The occupant represented perfection to Jackson as soon as he spoke his first word, in “perfect” English. Very obvious in this regard is the baptismal rite of sterilization which prepared Jackson even to stand in the presence of the holy (wholly perfect). To enter the body of Christ, a Christian must be “washed” by the waters of regeneration and don garments “white as snow” in the Sacrament of Baptism.

The UFO literature is replete with the confidence that the aliens who fly these inter-planetary machines come from a civilization which is markedly advanced over ours. Assuming the concepts of evolution and progress, the extraterrestrials are believed to have achieved insuperable technological marvels. So advanced are the Planetithes beyond the present stage of earth’s development, they told Dick Jackson, we look primitive in comparison.

Eternity is a quality of perfection, and the concern for eternity comes up repeatedly in UFO accounts as the concern for age. It is assumed that technological advances in medical science have enabled these extraterrestrial to greatly extend their life-span. One of the famous contactees of the 1950’s, Howard Menger, recounts how he encountered a beautiful spaccwoman—would we expect her to be homely— who appeared to be about 25 years old. She told young Howard that she was more than 500. This is practically the equivalent of immortality. One bold UFO speculator, R.L. Dione, believes the extraterrestrials have through medical science discovered how to live forever. The spaccmen who visited Dick Jackson told him they were much older than they looked.

The Western biblical tradition to which we are heirs understands both the shortening of life (Genesis 6:3) and its termination in death (Romans 5:12) as the result of sin. It follows that if these extraterrestrials have great longevity or even immortality, then they either never had sin or are gradually outgrowing it. Not only are they more advanced than we technologically, but morally as well. They represent a level of perfection that stands over against us as judge and lure.

Popular evangelist Billy Graham said in a 1976 interview he believes extraterrestrial intelligences do exist and that they “...probably...have found answers to many of the problems we face on earth. Disease, war, environmental pollution may be nonexistent on these other living planets.”

The new world offered to Dick Jackson by the UFAOnauts was perfect in many ways: no war, no competition, no disease, and no meaningless activity. It is no accident that Jackson described it to me as “heaven.”

In order for us primitives (sinners) to enter this world of perfection there must be a fundamental change; we must leave everything behind and adopt wholly new ways. The old world of impurity and profanity cannot be carried over into the new and more perfect realm.

Fourth, redemption. The UFAOnauts offered Dick Jackson and others the equivalent of salvation or, in the words of many religion scholars, the means for “ultimate transformation.” For Jackson himself, it comes in the form of transcending his mortal destiny: the cure of all his deadly diseases. For everyone else who makes the trip to the new world, it comes in the form of participation in the realm of perfection. Anxiety over striving for the necessities of life or from the inner striving to compete for superiority will be overcome. There will be absolute security, wealth, and cooperation. The transportation to the new planet will include a transformation of the very nature of human living. Psychic tension will be relieved in a world of such harmony. The value of tears known here on earth will be replaced with the bliss of a new heaven created by technology. The spaccmen who make the transformation possible will function as what I have elsewhere called our “celestial savior.”

One of the salient themes of the great era of contactees in the 1950’s was atomic weaponry testing. Fears of the cold war were compounded by the growing portent of nuclear holocaust. And no one in the West could clear
The Aetherius Society, a semi-mystical religious group which has branches on three continents, claims that spacemen are constantly fighting with us using supersensory devices in our struggle between good and evil.

And there is even a genre of flying saucer poetry on the theme of redemption. In 1958 a supraterrrestrial brother by the name of Hukar delivered his verse to the human race in care of an earthly by the name of John C. Hoffman:

Our reason for coming, is to try to recover from old Mother Earth, our dear long lost Brothers...
There are many things of value, Some of which the eye can see. But the priceless gift that we offer to you, Is the Redeemer's love for free.

Sociological and psychological analyses of the UFO phenomenon correlate sightings of, and belief in, extraterrestrial visitors with psychic tension. An eidetic analysis of the symbolic meaning in UFOs uncovers what in existentialist-religious vocabularies is called angst. This is the element in the human spirit that seeks to break the bonds of finitude, that fears the challenges put to authentic human living by evil and death. UFO sightings give sublimated expression to a profound religious need, the need for redemption through the gracious activity of a power greater than ourselves.

Conclusion

It is to be noticed that these patent religious themes are covert rather than overt. There is nothing conspicuously religious here, nor any mention of spirits, demons, angels, miracles, or magic. Everything is completely natural; nothing is supernatural. A UFO report may become a story of staggering implications for human history. It may be difficult to believe. But it is a story that is completely possible according to all our known laws of physics as popularly understood. Even the heavenly chariot that visited Dick Jackson was an ordinary electric motor writ large. It does not fly on the wings of supernatural angels.

Mr. Jackson denies his religious feelings because he is convinced he has outgrown the need for religion. He is mature. He has come of age. "Religion is OK for children," he said, but not for him.

Similarly, some argue that Western civilization has come of age. We have become so intellectually mature we may now put aside childish things, such as belief in God. Belief in God is like belief in magic, and we moderns believe in science, not magic. We are supposed to know and be able to explain so many things that our primitive forefathers, who first
formulated our religious principles, were ignorant of. After all, didn't people in ancient civilizations simply use the concept of "god" to explain things they didn't understand? Today we understand. Don't we?

Dick Jackson has no personal belief in ghosts or God's Holy Ghost because he has never seen one. He is an empiricist: "Show me one and I'll believe in them." His is a popularized understanding of what the scientist does. The scientist supposedly believes only what he can prove through empirical observation or experiments. To speak of God is to speak of things unseen. To speak of a man from outer space is to speak of someone who, at least in principle, could be seen by anyone with eyes to look.

The psychological ruminations examined earlier in this article posit a psychic tension seeking release through UFOs. The goal of UFO belief is to overcome stress due to the sense of alienation we feel in a world that is not truly a home. But why does this dynamic express itself in the form of the UFO? I am suggesting that our religious needs are deep and unrelenting, and that they meet constant frustration in the modern context. They are frustrated because they are required to express themselves only in the language and concepts of a naturalized and scientized worldview. Religion is not at home with modernity; it is alienated.

Covert UFO theology is the attempt to relieve the tension and make peace with science. It is the attempt to construct a wholesome unitary horizon for self-understanding—a myth which incorporates both our religious feelings and our naturalistic assumptions.

1. ibid., p. 236.
1. ibid., p. 237.
1. ibid., pp. 234f.
1. ibid., p. 15. 11 p. 11 ibid., p. 2.
1. ibid., pp. 21, 42, 148, 162. 14 ibid., p. 16. 18 ibid., pp. 22f.
1. ibid., UFO Experience, Chapter 10.
1. For a brief introduction to religious UFO groups, see Robert Ellwood's treatment in Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973) Chapter 4. And for an insightful theological inquiry into the basis for the cults of the (Notes concluded on p. 297)