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APOCALYPSE IN EARLY UFO AND ALIEN-BASED RELIGIONS: CHRISTIAN  
AND THEOSOPHICAL THEMES

CAROLE M. CUSACK

INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

UFO and alien-based religions crystallised as contemporary Western spiritual phenomena in the post-World-War-II era, and reflected both historico-political and moral anxieties about the atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, and the atmosphere of paranoia and expectation of the “end of the world” that emerged as a result of the arms race between the United States of America and the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> The theology of such religions drew upon two principal sources, one physical and the other spiritual. First, the hardware-oriented, proto-conspiracist sightings of “flying saucers” by Kenneth Arnold in 1947 and the Roswell Incident the same year, in which an unidentified object crashed in Roswell, New Mexico, and the United States Air Force cleared the site of debris, seemed to provide evidence that UFOs and the extra-terrestrials who travelled in them were real.<sup>3</sup> Second, the Theosophical idea of Ascended Masters who could transmit occult knowledge to humanity by means of clairaudient mediums or “channelling” was extended to include aliens from distant planets (in addition to Tibetan lamas, denizens of lost worlds like Atlantis and Mu, the dead, and other putative sources of wisdom).<sup>4</sup>

This potent mixture was married to the popular cultural narratives of science fiction, such as the influential “alien messiah” film *The Day the Earth Stood Still*

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks are due to my research assistant, Venetia Robertson, who helped me with the initial library searches and note-taking for this chapter, and to Don Barrett, whose tireless encouragement has contributed in no small way to my research over the years.

<sup>2</sup> John A. Saliba, “Religious Dimensions of UFO Phenomena,” in *The Gods Have Landed: New Religions From Other Worlds*, ed. James R. Lewis (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 54.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, Volume II (London and New York: T. & T. Clark, 2005), 170-71.

<sup>4</sup> J. Gordon Melton, “The Contactees: A Survey,” in Lewis, *The Gods Have Landed*, 5-6.

(1951). The themes of apocalypse and conspiracy were particularly congruent with the Cold-War atmosphere of paranoia and scapegoating; thus the notion that the appearance of UFOs and the visitations by extra-terrestrials were signs that – unless peace on earth be achieved – the end times were at hand gained currency. The enlightened ones would be taken into the ships before the destruction of the world.<sup>5</sup> UFO and alien-based religions developed in divergent directions; while some advocated an eschaton of battle and destruction (e.g., the Church Universal and Triumphant), others envisaged a harmonious Intergalactic Parliament in which humans participated in peace (e.g., the Aetherius Society). This chapter examines the apocalyptic expectations of several UFO and alien-based religions, and identifies both their sources in the religious currents of the early twentieth century, and their imbrication with post-War political discourses.

#### MODERNITY, SCIENCE AND RELIGION

UFO and alien-based religions emerged in the wake of World War II and drew on alternative spiritual currents including Theosophy and esoteric Christianity and the anti-Communist and militaristic rhetoric of the democratic West, particularly America. These “spiritual” and “material” sources employed radically different notions of modernity, particularly in terms of the relationship between science and religion. Theosophy, founded by Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891) and American Civil War veteran Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907) in New York in 1875 manifested particular nineteenth-century interests, chief among which were the unification of “Western” and “Eastern” religions and erasure of the divide

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<sup>5</sup> Ruth Montgomery, *Aliens Among Us* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1985), 21.

between science and religion.<sup>6</sup> These two aims were related, in that Blavatsky claimed that the traditional religion of the West, Christianity, was incompatible with the new science of evolution, whereas the religions of the East, Hinduism and Buddhism, were not. Mark Bevir has stated that “Blavatsky... outlined an occult cosmology which embraced both a geological time scale and an evolutionary view of development” and that she “denied that occult science transgressed the law of nature.”<sup>7</sup> Theosophy embraced the quest for a “key to all mythologies,” advocated gender and racial equality, explored esoteric themes including the paranormal and lost civilisations like Atlantis, and forecast the imminent arrival of the “World Teacher” (known variously as Maitreya—from the Buddhist tradition—or the Cosmic Christ), whose coming would inaugurate mass enlightenment in a benevolent eschatological scenario.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, the Enlightenment philosophers in the eighteenth century and the scientists of the nineteenth century advocated a broadly anti-religious position. The power of reason was celebrated: this led to the denial of Christian doctrines including original sin and the assertion rather that humans were born free and good; vocal criticism of sources of authority like religious and governmental institutions; the promotion of science as a disinterested source of truth; an interest in the rights of those formerly excluded from power (e.g., slaves and women), and widespread agitation for democratic change.<sup>9</sup> This view of modern culture shared an emphasis on science and progress with Blavatsky’s articulation of Theosophical modernity, but was opposed to both magic and religion whereas she argued for their continued relevance. In the twentieth century two world wars intensified disaffection from

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<sup>6</sup> Mark Bevir, “The West Turns Eastwards: Madame Blavatsky and the Transformation of the Occult Tradition,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63:3 (1994), 748.

<sup>7</sup> Bevir, “The West Turns Eastwards,” 753.

<sup>8</sup> Al Boag, “From Blavatsky to Krishnamurti: Hindu Chronology, Biblical Eschatology, Physiology,” *Literature & Aesthetics* 21:1 (2011), 116-134.

<sup>9</sup> Perez Zagorin, *How the Idea of Religious Tolerance Came to the West* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 291.

institutional Christianity, and after World War II knowledge of Nazi death camps, in particular, caused disillusionment with science and progress as master narratives. From the 1950s spirituality and religion would return to challenge science's claim to be the only authenticated source of knowledge, the scientific understanding of reality as unchallengeable.

The post-War period was fertile ground for conspiracy theories, with the Cold War and the threat of nuclear war fuelling citizens' distrust of governments, both democratically-elected and Communist. What is termed "UFOlogy" is dated from 1947, the year of the sighting of flying discs by Kenneth Arnold and the Roswell Incident, the "Ground Zero" event of UFOlogists. John A. Saliba has argued that the majority of people interested in UFOlogy are not religious, but are rather social scientists, natural scientists, government and the military, conspiracy theorists, adventurers, and hobbyists.<sup>10</sup> However, UFOlogy has often re-worked narratives derived from religion, and UFOlogical organisations range from decidedly non-religious to decidedly religious groups, such as the Ashtar Command, the Nation of Islam, the Raelians, and Heaven's Gate.<sup>11</sup> There is as yet no scientifically valid evidence for the existence of alien life, and speculation about UFO visits to Earth is dependent on unscholarly interpretations of archaeological sites, esoteric phenomena, religious texts, and a range of other "evidence." It is thus necessary to analyse the appeal of UFOlogical narratives in the modern West.

Three methodological concepts are employed in this chapter to identify the sources upon which UFO-based "alternative eschatologies" draw: rejected knowledge, the cultic milieu, and stigmatised knowledge claims. Rejected knowledge is a concept promoted by the Scottish chronicler of the occult, James Webb (1946-

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<sup>10</sup> Saliba, "Religious Dimensions of UFO Phenomena," 17-22

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Wojcik, "Apocalyptic and Millenarian Aspects of American Ufoism," in *UFO Religions*, ed. Christopher Partridge (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 280-81.

1980). He proposed that knowledge claims that emanated from “the Establishment” were regarded as suspect, and views that opposed the dominant worldview were understood to retreat into subcultural undergrounds.<sup>12</sup> This retreat from mainstream perceptions can be observed in the espousal of “fringe” notions, by groups like Theosophy, sectarian Christianity, esoteric fraternities, and pseudo-scientific advocates. The second concept, that of the “cultic milieu,” was developed by the English sociologist Colin Campbell.<sup>13</sup> In his thought this is a genuine subculture with both ideological and social structures, rather than merely a floating reservoir of “spiritual beliefs.” The cultic milieu is by nature hostile to authority, but has unifying tendencies that involve the media, collective institutions, and social networks.<sup>14</sup>

The third concept is that of “stigmatized knowledge,” which Michael Barkun has divided into five categories: a) forgotten knowledge, which was once known but has been lost (e.g., the ancient wisdom once possessed by the inhabitants of Atlantis); b) superseded knowledge, which was once authoritatively recognised but has since lost status (e.g., astrology and alchemy); c) ignored knowledge, including claims that have persisted in low-prestige social groups but are not taken seriously by the educated middle class (e.g., folk medicine); d) rejected knowledge, meaning those claims which are explicitly rejected as false (e.g., UFO abductions); and e) suppressed knowledge, which comprised those knowledge claims that are allegedly known by the authorities but are deliberately concealed due to selfish motives (e.g., alien visitations, secret cancer cures, and so on).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> James Webb, *The Occult Establishment* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1974), 10.

<sup>13</sup> Colin Campbell, “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu, and Secularization,” *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* 5 (1972), 119-36.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (London: University of California Press, 2003), 25.

<sup>15</sup> Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 27.

These forms of rejected knowledge all rely on the existence of a conspiracy that inextricably links them to alternative spirituality, in which “a) nothing happens by accident, b) nothing is as it seems, c) everything is connected... principles [which] are fundamental to much New Age thought and alternative spirituality.”<sup>16</sup> Conspiracy acts as both the explanation for why certain types of knowledge are rejected, and as a guarantee of their reliability. It has been noted that many new religious forms in late modernity exhibit what Barkun has termed “fact-fiction reversal,” in which notions of fictional and factual explanations are abandoned, or are actually exchanged. This rationale results in disbelief in the basic fabric of reality (i.e., life as it presents itself in “commonsense” terms).<sup>17</sup> In contrast, novels and films are believed to contain foundational truths that are hidden in fictional forms because they are dangerous to “the establishment.” Recent examples of this phenomenon with a specifically apocalyptic tinge include the Y2K panic in late 1999, Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins’ Christian “end times” series of novels, *Left Behind* (1995-2007), the *X-Files* (1993-2002) television series, films including *Armageddon* (1998), *Avatar* (2009), and *The Book of Eli* (2010), and the so-called “Mayan apocalypse,” predicted for 21 December 2012 by New Age figure José Arguelles (who was also responsible for the Harmonic Convergence, a globally synchronised meditation which took place on 16 and 17 August 1987), and popularised by UFOlogical conspiracists such as David Icke.<sup>18</sup>

## APOCALYPSE, END TIMES, AND WORLD RENEWAL

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<sup>16</sup> David Voas and Charlotte Ward, “The Emergence of Conspirativity,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26:1 (2011), 104.

<sup>17</sup> Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 29.

<sup>18</sup> Voas and Ward, “The Emergence of Conspirativity,” 112.

This chapter uses a number of interrelated terms to describe the “end times” speculations of UFO and alien-based religions. “Apocalyptic” is derived from the Greek ἀποκάλυψις (*apocalypsis*), which has the literal meaning of uncovering or revelation. In Judeo-Christian religion, this “revelation” is of the imminent “end times” and the transformational upheaval the world must undergo.<sup>19</sup> Closely related terms include eschatology (the study of the end times), from the Greek *eschaton* meaning “last.” Richard Landes has argued that eschatology is both a secular and a religious discourse, concerned with what are believed to be the final events of history. He also linked millennialism, millenarianism, and chiliasm to this complex of ideas.<sup>20</sup> The millennium has a specific meaning in Christianity, which Stephen Hunt defined as “[a] period of a thousand years, especially that of Christ’s reign in person on earth.”<sup>21</sup> These terms are used indiscriminately, and may serve to indicate the absolute end of time, the total destruction of the world, or merely to refer to the passing of an aspect of the current order that is deemed undesirable. The most notable aspect of millennial thought in the alternative milieu is, as Richard Landes has said, that “millennialism is a meme programmed to spread as rapidly and pervasively as possible. Under the right—apocalyptic—conditions, that meme can spread at epidemic speeds... with explosive force.”<sup>22</sup>

The positive outcome of such end-times scenarios is that the destruction of the present reality ushers in the new world. This can be seen in Christian-influenced New Age thinkers such as Ruth Montgomery and Edgar Cayce, whose visions posited that the return of Jesus to Earth “follows a period of... catastrophes but inaugurates the

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Landes, *Heaven on Earth: The Varieties of Millennial Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 18.

<sup>20</sup> Landes, *Heaven on Earth*, 20-21.

<sup>21</sup> Stephen Hunt, “Introduction: The Christian Millennium—An Enduring Theme,” in *Christian Millenarianism: From the Early Church to Waco*, ed. Stephen Hunt (London: Hurst & Company, 2001), 2.

<sup>22</sup> Landes, *Heaven on Earth*, 9.



New Age millennium.”<sup>23</sup> Michael York argued that contemporary New Age millenarianism is often Gnostic, rather than orthodox Christian in tone. He noted that the New Age takes an “essentially Gnostic stance concerning the unreality or at least the devaluing of the material... [but] does not accept the Gnostic duality between cosmic good and cosmic evil.”<sup>24</sup> Yet Christian-oriented UFO religions such as Heaven’s Gate, and the Christian and Hindu-influenced Church Universal and Triumphant (CUT) both exhibited the duality between cosmic good and cosmic evil in their theology of the end times.

#### THE CHRISTIAN APOCALYPSE IN UFO RELIGIONS

A potent mixture of apocalyptic expectation, conspiracy politics, and ideas about the “true nature” of humanity, reality, and the future was married to the popular cultural narratives of science fiction in the 1950s, including the influential “alien messiah” film *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951). Scripted by Edmund H. North (with a score by composer Bernard Herrmann, famous for his collaborations with Alfred Hitchcock), the plot portrayed an alien messiah, Klaatu, accompanied by his robot bodyguard Gort, who landed in a spaceship in Washington in the United States.<sup>25</sup> Klaatu’s mission is to inform humanity that violence, and the threat of nuclear war in particular, is alarming the peaceful citizens of other planets. During his sojourn on Earth, Klaatu is given a tour of the city by Bobby, a small boy. He is grieved to learn that those in the Arlington National Cemetery have perished in wars, and he warns Professor Barnhart that Earth must embrace peace. Yet, rather than heed his message of peace, humans choose to kill Klaatu, who like Jesus is resurrected on the third day.

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<sup>23</sup> Michael York, “New Age Millenarianism and Its Christian Influences,” in *Christian Millenarianism: From the Early Church to Waco*, ed. Stephen Hunt (London: Hurst & Company, 2001), 225.

<sup>24</sup> York, “New Age Millenarianism and Its Christian Influences,” 233.

<sup>25</sup> Wojcik, “Apocalyptic and Millenarian Aspects of American Ufoism,” 275.

He then departs Earth, with the dire warning that “humanity must submit to live peacefully, being watched over by the robots (like Gort) or be destroyed.”<sup>26</sup> This model was explicitly Christian and posited that aliens were benevolent beings of superior wisdom, who desired only to assist humanity.

A rather different, though still Christian-themed, scenario emerged in the early 1970s, when Marshall Herff Applewhite (1931-1997) and Bonnie-Lu Nettles (1927-1985) who were also known as Bo and Peep, Guinea and Pig, and Ti and Do, taught that Jesus was a being from the next kingdom who had become incarnate in the womb of Mary. He awakened to this fact while on Earth and began teaching others the way to ascend to the next kingdom. Applewhite and Nettles believed they were “the Two,” that is the two witnesses spoken of in *Revelation* 11:3.<sup>27</sup> The Two taught a complex dispensationalist view of world history, in which there were seven eras, five of which were in the past (the biblical ages from Adam to Jesus), one of which was present, and one in the future. Although they were both Christians, Nettles had been a “member of the Houston Theosophical Society and a amateur astrologer... [and] inhabited a New Age subculture of disincarnate spirits, ascended masters, telepathic powers, and hidden and revealed gnosis.”<sup>28</sup> This influenced their apocalyptic vision, which remained basically Biblical, but also incorporated elements of science fiction, UFO religion, and Theosophically-influenced notions such as Heaven’s Gate members being “walk-ins,” or supernatural beings who had deliberately entered

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<sup>26</sup> Matthew Etherden, “*The Day the Earth Stood Still*: 1950s Sci-Fi, Religion and the Alien Messiah,” *Journal of Religion and Film* 9:2 (2005), [www.unomaha.edu/jrf/Vol9No2/EtherdenEarthStill.htm](http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/Vol9No2/EtherdenEarthStill.htm). Accessed December 10, 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Balch, “Waiting For the Ships: Disillusionment and the Revitalization of Faith in Bo and Peep’s UFO Cult,” in Lewis, *The Gods Have Landed*, 142.

<sup>28</sup> Benjamin Ethan Zeller, “Scaling Heaven’s Gate: Individualism and Salvation in a New Religious Movement,” in *Heaven’s Gate: Postmodernity and Popular Culture in a Suicide Group*, ed. George Chryssides (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 157.

mortal bodies, in order to assist humans to enter “the Next Level” which was preferable to “spending your energy at the human level.”<sup>29</sup>

In 1988, three years after Nettles had died, Applewhite issued an important statement that explained that new members (or students) “were briefed as a crew aboard a spacecraft about how they would incarnate into human vehicles in order to do a task. They left their Kingdom ‘world’ and came into this ‘world’ beginning in the late 1940s... some left their Next Level bodies via so-called UFO ‘crashes’.”<sup>30</sup> This in effect argued that Heaven’s Gate members were essentially aliens on Earth, “stranger[s] in a strange land” like Moses, in Exodus 2:22. In March 1997 thirty-nine members committed suicide, believing that they would complete their Human Individual Metamorphosis and ascend to the Next Level, via a spacecraft concealed by the Hale-Bopp Comet. The Heaven’s Gate suicides generated widespread disbelief and discomfort, particularly when it was revealed that some of the men had undergone surgical castration, a profoundly Gnostic rejection of the flesh.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, when framed in terms of what anthropologist Mary Douglas has termed “new taboos and rituals aimed at the redemption of the world” such dramatic physical manifestations of spiritual beliefs are understandable as measures of commitment and faith in the coming transformation.<sup>32</sup>

## THE THEOSOPHICAL APOCALYPSE IN UFO RELIGIONS

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<sup>29</sup> Winston David, “Heaven’s Gate: A Study of Religious Obedience,” in Chryssides, *Heaven’s Gate*, 89.

<sup>30</sup> Marshall Herff Applewhite, “‘88 Update—The UFO Two and Their Crew,” in Chryssides, *Heaven’s Gate*, 27.

<sup>31</sup> Landes, *Heaven on Earth*, 406.

<sup>32</sup> Anthony B. van Fossen, “How Do Movements Survive Failures of Prophecy,” in *Expecting Armageddon: Essential Readings in Failed Prophecy*, ed. Jon R. Stone (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 179.

Madame Blavatsky, the fountainhead of Theosophically-influenced UFOlogy, was deeply interested in lost worlds such as Atlantis, Mu, Lemuria and others.<sup>33</sup> Guy Ballard (1878-1939), an inheritor of the Theosophical tradition and the founder of the I AM movement in the United States, had a similar preoccupation with sacred geography, and he linked Mount Shasta in California (where he allegedly encountered and received knowledge from the Comte de Saint Germain, a member of the “Great White Brotherhood”), with the lost continent of Mu, and also with the Hindu sacred mountain, Mount Meru.<sup>34</sup> I AM, which stood for the Theosophical concept of “Ascended Masters,” was essentially a Theosophical system, but space aliens—for example, twelve tall Venusians—were among the Masters who advised Ballard. The Masters were understood to be beings who had reached at least the fifth level of initiation, and who could be contacted via mediumistic activity. This is a basic distinction among UFO religions: so-called “contactee movements” channel the wisdom of extraterrestrials, who possess superior capabilities of the Atlantean type, and do not use physical spaceships; other movements (like the Raelians, founded by Claude Vorilhon [b. 1946] in 1973) argue that there are physical ships that visit earth and the aliens are possessed of superior technological and engineering skills.<sup>35</sup>

Guy Ballard blended the teachings of the Great White Brotherhood with patriotic fervour and belief in the cosmic destiny of America. Critics have argued that his wife Edna was a follower of William Dudley Pelley, the American anti-Semite, spiritualist, and founder of the fascist organisation the Silver Legion (or “Silver Shirts”). I AM had allegedly recruited members for the Silver Legion for political

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<sup>33</sup> Garry W. Trompf and Lauren Bernauer, “Producing Lost Civilisations: Theosophical Concerts in Literature, Visual Media and Popular Culture,” in *Handbook of New Religions and Cultural Production*, ed. Carole M. Cusack and Alex Norman (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 101-31.

<sup>34</sup> Bradley C. Whitsel, *The Church Universal and Triumphant: Elizabeth Clare Prophet’s Apocalyptic Movement* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 23-26.

<sup>35</sup> Rael, *The Final Message: Humanity’s Origins and Our Future Explained* (London: Tagman Press, 1998), 19-20.

ends.<sup>36</sup> Ballard and his wife Edna were politically conservative and a central I AM activity was an occult banishing ritual aimed at Franklin D. Roosevelt. Using such rituals, Ballard claimed to have annihilated nearly half a million people in Philadelphia, over three hundred thousand in New York, and about a million in the remainder of the United States within a period of twenty-four hours.<sup>37</sup> I AM and its successors the Summit Lighthouse (founded by Mark Prophet in 1958) and the Church Universal and Triumphant (founded by Mark's widow Elizabeth Clare Prophet, née Wulf, in 1974) were anti-New Deal, anti-Communist, pro-White, anti-civil rights; furthermore, survivalism and the acquisition of weapons were major foci. Mark Prophet preached against Communism, social degeneracy and left-wing ideals as forces bringing America into darkness, away from the light of the Ascended Masters.<sup>38</sup>

The Prophets' apocalyptic vision intensified in 1962, when they instituted an inner circle called the Keepers of the Flame Fraternity at the behest of El Morya (an Ascended Master). The Keepers' spiritual work was directed to keep alive the divine flame in human hearts, and they claimed descent from the Venusian Master Sanat Kumara.<sup>39</sup> The Keepers were archconservative, both socially and politically. In 1965 Mark Prophet published *The Soulless Ones*, a book that revealed a cosmic conspiracy in which aliens performed experiments on humans and implanted soulless automata among humankind to control it from high places.<sup>40</sup> Mark Prophet died in 1973, and Elizabeth Clare announced "Operation Christ Command," a strategy warning of imminent war with the Soviet Union. Elizabeth Clare Prophet identified the enemy as

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<sup>36</sup> Whitsel, *The Church Universal and Triumphant*, 24-25.

<sup>37</sup> George Thayer, *The Farther Shores of Politics: The American Political Fringe Today* (London: Allen Lane, 1968), 266-67.

<sup>38</sup> Whitsel, *The Church Universal and Triumphant*, 31, 105.

<sup>39</sup> Whitsel, *The Church Universal and Triumphant*, 30.

<sup>40</sup> Whitsel, *The Church Universal and Triumphant*, 32-33.

a conspiracy of powerbrokers in league with the Nephilim (including the Council on Foreign Relations and the Trilateral Commission). She drew on UFOlogy and conspiracy theories promoted by writers like Zechariah Sitchin and the “reptilian” ideas popularised by authors including David Icke. The Soviet Union and Communism were understood as earthly representations of the Nephilim’s conspiracy in the 1980s.<sup>41</sup> CUT built vast underground nuclear shelters at its headquarters, Royal Teton Ranch, Montana, as Elizabeth Clare Prophet announced the coming nuclear holocaust for 23 April 1990. After the attack failed to happen, the movement suffered mass defection and faded from view. Elizabeth Clare, afflicted with Alzheimer’s Disease, died in 2009.

A more benevolent version of the Theosophical apocalypse was promulgated by the Aetherius Society, which was founded in England in 1954 by George King (1919-1997). According to official accounts, King was a master of yoga and possessed profound spiritual knowledge, and in 1954 was approached by the “Cosmic Masters of the Solar System [who] began using him as Primary Terrestrial Mental Channel.”<sup>42</sup> King claimed to have communicated with the Venusian Master Aetherius, Mars Sector 6, and Master Jesus among others, and to have become aware that humanity was invited to participate in an Intergalactic Parliament with various alien species, a body dedicated to the pursuit of peace in order to save humanity and the earth from destruction. This Parliament also worked to facilitate the arrival of the “Next Master” (a messiah similar to the Theosophical World Teacher), who will descend to Earth in a spacecraft to destroy the world’s armies. Aetherius Society members meditate and pray in order to store energy (in devices called “spiritual

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<sup>41</sup> Whitsel, *The Church Universal and Triumphant*, 42-46.

<sup>42</sup> Mikael Rothstein, “Hagiography and Text in the Aetherius Society: Aspects of the Social Construction of a Religious Leader,” in *New Religions in a Postmodern World*, ed. Mikael Rothstein and Reender Kranenborg (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2003), 170.

energy batteries”), and are dedicated to pacifism, alternative medicine, channelling, and dowsing, and to drawing *prana* to the earth from Satellite Number 3, an orbiting spacecraft, through meditation.<sup>43</sup>

Aetherians believe in reincarnation, and argue that certain alien species are so developed compared to humans that they have been mistakenly referred to as gods throughout history. This view resembles the Raelian re-interpretation of the Bible as chronicling a series of visits to Earth by the Elohim, aliens who were accepted as gods, but were in fact scientists who had genetically engineered humans.<sup>44</sup> The Aetherius Society also subscribes to certain conspiracist beliefs (chiefly that a sinister body, the “Silence Group,” has forced governments to cover up evidence of UFO contact and alien communication). They also pilgrimage to the summits of sacred mountains, which has apocalyptic significance because if their mission to bring peace and enlightenment to the earth fails, they believe that they will be rescued from atop these sacred mountains.<sup>45</sup>

Theosophical UFO and alien-based religions developed in divergent ways: some, like CUT, advocated an eschaton of battle and destruction; while others, like the Aetherians, envisaged an Intergalactic Parliament in which humans and alien species pursued the goal of universal peace. Themes of apocalypse and conspiracy were particularly congruent with the Cold-War mindset, and were thus more popular in the United States. The Aetherius Society reflected the “cosy” milieu of 1950s English alternative spirituality, and is now a worldwide body with a strong Internet presence, flourishing within the “New Age” scene. Christian UFO and alien-based groups generally exhibit less in the way of paranoia, conspiracism and violent

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<sup>43</sup> Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, Volume II, 182-83.

<sup>44</sup> Rael, *The Final Message*, 95-96.

<sup>45</sup> Anon, “The Holy Mountains of the World,” *The Aetherius Society*, at <http://www.aetherius.org/index.cfm?app=content&SectionID=79&PageID=35>. Accessed 20 January, 2013.

apocalyptic ideas. Heaven's Gate, significantly, re-defined suicide as staying with their earthly bodies; to live was to ascend to the "Next Level," by means of what the unenlightened might have mistakenly believed to be suicide, the killing of their earthly bodies. Richard Landes commented on the Heaven's Gate fondness for the television series, *Star Trek*, in particular the classic motto, "Beam me up, Scotty," stating that "[t]he Heaven's Gate suicide on March 26, 1997 was a grotesquely literal application of this motto, and a parody of Christian Rapture apocalyptic, driven to wit's end by the interminable delay of the great event."<sup>46</sup> It may be, however, that this assessment is unfair, in that noteworthy events in the heavens, such as the manifestation of comets, have been taken as signs of the activity of divine beings and more specifically the "end times" throughout history.

The Raelians were mentioned in passing in this chapter, and interpret the narratives of the Bible in a secular and "pseudo-scientific" manner to in support of what Rael has called "atheist religion." In the Raelian end times, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad descend in a spacecraft to the Raelian Embassy in Israel and reveal that they are aliens made immortal through cloning, and not gods.<sup>47</sup> Thus, is it impossible to simply equate Theosophically-influenced UFO apocalypses with peace and Christian-influenced UFO apocalypses with violence, or *vice versa*. What is important is that all UFO religions marry modern notions of science and progress to elements from traditional religions, and develop apocalyptic visions that draw upon, and are influenced by, popular culture and the conspiracist subculture.

## CONCLUSION

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<sup>46</sup> Landes, *Heaven on Earth*, 407.

<sup>47</sup> Landes, *Heaven on Earth*, 409-14.



I have elsewhere argued that invented religions, rather than being best classified as “fakes,” are properly understood as the inevitable outcome of a society that values novelty, in which individuals build their identity through the consumption of products, experiences, and spiritualities.<sup>48</sup> In the context of Western cultural trends, the history of UFO and alien-based religions can be placed in the category of “invented religions” in sundry ways. It can be argued that Helena Petrovna Blavatsky “invented” her Tibetan Ascended Masters, and that the Theosophical Society’s popularisation of mediumship as a means of receiving ancient wisdom created the possibility of revelations from aliens. The academic study of religion eschews theological concerns and views religion as a human cultural product like art or educational systems.

Sociologist Peter Berger posited that humans construct their world through externalisation, objectivation, and internalisation. For Berger

[e]xternalization is the ongoing outpouring of human being [sic] into the world, both in the physical and the mental activity of men. Objectivation is the attainment of the products of this activity (again both physical and mental) of a reality that confronts its producers as a facticity external to and other than themselves. Internalisation is the reappropriation by men of this same reality, transforming it once again from structures of the objective world into structures of the subjective consciousness. It is through externalisation that society is a human product. It is through objectivation that society becomes a

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<sup>48</sup> Carole M. Cusack, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: 2010).

reality *sui generis*. It is through internalization that man is a product of society.<sup>49</sup>

UFOlogical religions claim to reveal the true nature of reality, and to explain humanity's origins and future. These "ultimate questions" were formerly answered by traditional religion and religious institutions. In the twenty-first century they tend to be answered by individuals crafting their own *bricolage* of beliefs and practices from available sources (the Internet, film, television, science fiction and fantasy novels, and the "rejected knowledge" of conspiracy theories). UFO religions are numerically small, but reflect crucial modern spiritual trends, not least in the area of apocalyptic visions, and the reinterpretation of Christianity.

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<sup>49</sup> Peter Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 4.

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