

Religious Characteristics Of The Unidentified Flying Object / Extraterrestrial Intelligence Movement

By Carl T. Feagans, 2004

Note: I wrote this paper for a class in anthropological methods in 2004. It was more of a learning experiment in writing and research than a serious look at the phenomenon of UFO culture, which had a temporary bloom around that time on the Internet. In reading it today, I'm sure it would be a very much different paper today had I been assigned the topic (I chose the topic in 2004). Still, I remember the process of writing and researching it and I had fun. This, I think, is key to doing academic work: enjoy the process. This paper was never published, but did get some use by students who were subjected to it by a professor I never met when I had it hosted on an old Earthlink account. I only hope they weren't completely bored by it all!

INTRODUCTION

On March 26, 1997, 39 members of the Heaven's Gate UFO cult took their lives in a three-day suicide (Woodward & Stone, 1997). Their leader and founder, Marshal Applewhite, convinced 38 others that in order to board the UFO that was a companion to the Hale-Bopp comet and would ascend them into heaven, abandonment of their corporeal selves was necessary. They would have to leave their bodies behind and make the trip only with their souls. News reports, magazine articles and books that reported on the event used words such as "brainwashed," "indoctrinated," and "programmed." Certainly a level of control was imposed on his followers, but history has demonstrated that humans have and will engage in extreme behaviors as direct results of belief systems. Zande {Evans-Pritchard, 1937} use of poison-oracles for divination, the witch trials of Salem, Massachusetts (Crapo, 2003), Hitler's genocide of Jewish citizenry in Germany, and the World Trade Center attack in 2001 are each examples, in varied degrees, of extreme behavior based on belief systems. In most of the cited examples, the beliefs were rooted in religious thought.

Several studies and works have sought to examine the correlation between religious and paranormal thought, even with regard to unidentified flying objects (UFO) and extraterrestrial intelligence (ETI). Bader (2003) examined the membership of new age religious movements as well as the UFO abduction movement and discovered that a primary demographic was highly educated females. Newman and Baumeister (1996) pointed out that fantasies of alien abduction have likely origins in psychology, specifically centering on the need to escape self and dissatisfaction in needs of esteem and control. Patry and Pelletier (2001) conducted a survey that demonstrated 48% of their sample believed in UFOs, 35% disbelieved. Only 33%, however, believed in alien abduction and only 2% of the sample thought that they had been abducted, which mirrors the results of the Roper poll on unusual personal experiences (SciFi.com, 2002). As a part of the UFO/ETI movement, the alien abduction theme is but a small facet of a growing body of mythology and lore (see appendix A, Analysis of folklore related to Unidentified Flying Objects/Extraterrestrial Intelligence: Cattle Mutilation). It is conceivable that the results of surveys such as the instrument Bader used may provide different results if applied to a different demographic. Bader chose the alleged alien abductees for his sample, rather than general participants of the UFO movement. Indeed Orenstein (2002), interpreted the results of a Canadian survey on religion, which included questions on the paranormal, to conclude that those that accept mainstream religion in Canada (primarily Protestantism & Catholicism), are more likely to have beliefs in the paranormal than those that report no religious preference or than those that go to church on a regular, routine basis. In other words, those already of a religious frame of mind were susceptible to paranormal beliefs, but not if under close supervision and guidance of religious leaders.

In the Orenstein (2002) evaluation, it is noted that the survey largely neglected UFO/ETI specifically, concentrating instead on the paranormal in general. But if we are to expect religious characteristics to be present in the UFO/ETI movement, then there are specific, characteristic correlations to look for. Specifically:

- Firm Belief or Faith in the Supernatural
- Hope
- Message(s) to Humanity
- Explanation(s) of Mystery
- Rejection of the Secular

METHODOLOGY

In conducting research into the question of whether the UFO/ETI movement presents religious characteristics enough to be considered a religion, I evaluated available literature, examined the results of previous surveys and polls, conducted a questionnaire-based survey, and participated in a pseudoscience forum within an Internet community.

The literature review included many sources cited within this paper, but the more notable included Bader's (2003) *Supernatural Support Groups: Who Are UFO Abductees and Ritual-Abuse Survivors?*, in which a correlation between the two groups in the title are demonstrated. Bader made use of the 1990 General Social Survey as well as his own survey instrument, targeted to members of an alien abductee support group. Another journal article that was closely examined was *Extraterrestrial Beliefs and Experiences: An Application of the Theory of Reasoned Action* by Patry and Pelletier (2001). In it, the authors also made use of a survey instrument, this one comparing normative beliefs, attitudes, intentions and behavioral beliefs about UFO/ETI among full- and part-time college students.

Another survey instrument that I found useful in comparing to my own was the Fox News Paranormal and God Beliefs survey conducted in (Blanton) September 2003. The Fox News survey polled 900 registered voters across the United States and included religious belief questions about Heaven, Hell, angels and miracles as well as paranormal questions regarding ghosts, astrology, UFOs and reincarnation.

I conducted a survey with similar questions to the Fox News instrument but directed to a different demographic. Participants of the Feagans Survey were 27 high school-aged youth of mixed gender, however the sample was largely male.

Finally, a participant observation was conducted with several Internet message and chat sites, though only one web domain is consistently referred to in this paper: sciforums.com. This site is a vBulletin, php-based message board that contains a set of forums and sub-forums devoted largely to sciences such as chemistry, physics, biology, earth sciences, astronomy, and "human" sciences. There are also sub-forums devoted to history, politics, and the like, but the pseudoscience sub-forum was the main forum of interest to my participant observation. Citations to specific members of this group are given to differentiate between separate conversations and discussions, referred to by the participants as "threads." This form of participant observation was chosen because of the nature of the UFO/ETI

culture. The primary means of propagation and mythological elaboration for many sub-cultures and pop-culture ideas and concepts is the Internet and the UFO/ETI movement in particular has propagated well.

DISCUSSION

Firm Belief or Faith in the Supernatural

Religious followers maintain faith in their beliefs in spite of refutable or falsifiable evidence (Boyer, 2003). Many of the evidences for the beliefs are circular and violate the very basis of "proof" as dictated by science and reinforced by anecdotal claims of others who experienced the "Holy Spirit," found a peace, or recovered from an illness, injury or affliction. In many cases, the lack of explanation to the contrary is evidence enough to persuade in favor of the religious beliefs. In addition, extraordinary events can occur that reinforce faith and belief, such as faith healings, power of prayer, and even exorcism –or the testimony of others who have witnessed these "extraordinary" events. Religious deities themselves are supernatural and metaphysical: they defy empirical measurement and quantitative analysis, appear only to true believers, and cause miracles that also defy empirical measurement. Believers are not swayed by skeptical criticism and outright reject rational arguments counter to their beliefs.

Likewise, the UFO/ETI movement appears to cling to a belief system more than an evidenced based one. In observing a mixed community of science and pseudoscience proponents discussing the phenomenon of UFO/ETI, I noted (crazymikey, 2004) that "evidence" was frequently presented to demonstrate that ETI was a viable explanation for UFOs and other phenomena in the familiar world. Each evidentiary point was either successfully refuted by the science proponents or had no possibility of being falsified to begin with. In light of refutations given, however, the UFO/ETI proponents consistently refused to revise their hypotheses or contentions, much less abandon them for more logical explanation. That UFO/ETI proponents do not revise their beliefs and that they reject data that are unresponsive of their belief system while adhering to data that are supportive, no matter how spurious or irrational or regardless of the fact that these data have been deconstructed or debunked supports the notion that a belief in the supernatural or "ultimate reality" exists.

The supernatural is defined (Ember, et al, 2002) as "powers believed to be not human or not subject to the laws of nature. This clearly describes the UFO/ETI hypothesis, since ETI violate the laws of nature in their activities, even though this is usually rationalized by the UFO/ETI proponent who will state "they use laws of nature we have yet to understand." Kevin Randle (2000) writes of a "strange metallic material that wouldn't burn and wouldn't dent" in his description of the debris allegedly recovered from the alleged UFO crash at Roswell, NM in 1947. In *Communion* (Streiber, 1987), the author writes of being paralyzed and "floated" to an alien ship.

Rationalization is expected in religious thought. "God's will," or "God works in mysterious ways," are but two common examples. But even looking at very foreign (in idea, concept and culture to Western values) religions, we can note that the Zande use of poison-oracles (Evans-Pritchard, 1937) is a good example of religious rationalization and one very similar to the UFO/ETI version.

The poison-oracle administers a poison called benge to a live fowl and, based on the question and whether the fowl lives or dies after ingesting the strychnine-like substance, divines answers of yes or

no. It matters not to the Zande whether the fowl later dies after receiving another dose; whether the "un-blessed" dose kills another fowl; etc. Evans-Pritchard lists at least 8 elaborations that are held at the ready by Azande priests to explain the failure of a poison-oracle. If a European were to test the process for the Zande, and a fowl died, they would simply state, "good benge was not used." In fact, the death of the fowl would be the evidence of this.

This same process appears in use by UFO/ETI proponents. "They reason excellently (Evans-Pritchard, 1937) in the idiom of their beliefs, but they cannot reason outside, or against, their beliefs because they have no other idiom in which to express their thoughts." In the participant observation conducted with the Internet group at sciforums.com, (craterchains, 2004) several informants became engaged in a discussion that centered around the hypothesis that crater chains on other bodies in the solar system such as Mars and Ganymede were the result of a war. The hypothesis hinged on the idea that these craters could not be created by nature since the only observed breakup of a comet (SL-9) to impact a planet (Jupiter) did not create a "chain" of impacts into the atmosphere that would occur under the same conditions found in crater chains on Mars, where straight lines of adjacent craters have been noted. The hypothesis was thoroughly refuted by a skeptic that demonstrated comfortable knowledge of the physics and orbital mechanics involved in the crater formation process. The informant for whom the hypothesis belonged merely responded that skeptics have presented nothing but the same poor arguments time and again and that the likelihood that "disinformation agents" existed within the group was high. This informant's response was only three lines long in spite of the fact that this was by far the most detailed and informative explanation of orbital mechanics in the forum to date!

Robert Bellah (1964) indicated that world-rejection was a feature primarily of the axial period of historical religions such as Judaism and early Christianity, and largely disappeared in the early-modern and modern religious stages of the post-axial period. However, Christian dogma speaks of the End-times and Armageddon, and the point at which the world will be cleansed and only the righteous/true-believers will ascend. Other destruction myths are found in the Judeo-Christian texts, such as the flood myth, destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, which are still considered valid among Christian denominations. Other religions have similar mythologies, but most seem to center around the "sins" and shortcomings of humanity as the reason for rejecting worldly "ways."

The UFO/ETI movement also has world and humanity-rejection themes, as noted in the sciforums.com Internet discussion group above. Craterchains (2004), a previously cited informant, ended a post with "Disclosure IS inevitable. Will YOU survive it?" The implication appeared to be that an "end-time" is near, which will challenge humanity's survival as a whole. Ironically, "revelation" is a synonym to "disclosure." In the same Internet discussion group, crazymikey (2004b) goes into quite some detail about the insignificance of human achievement, citing the "quantum leaps" in technology as a proof of ETI influence on humanity, the implication clearly that humanity was incapable of displaying the ingenuity needed to advance to the integrated chip from a society that had not even vacuum tubes until 40 years earlier. Humanity's sinful nature being a shortcoming rejected by religion is comparable to humanity's incompetence, a shortcoming rejected by the UFO/ETI proponents of this particular group, many of who agreed with crazymikey's assessment. The Raelian UFO cult of Canada, who recently announced the as yet unconfirmed creation of the first human clone (Adler, 2003) also demonstrates clear rejection of humanity by publicly stating that *H. sapiens* are not the product of millions of years of evolution but rather some rather generous donations of DNA from an alien race known as the "Elohim," the Hebrew reference to God but the Raelian word for "those who come from the sky." The Raelians purport to be atheist, but their structure and organization is decidedly cult-like and they have

a belief system reinforced by a religious leader referred to as "His Holiness Rael."

Hope

For the religious believer, religiocentric perspective dictates that one's own religion is the correct one and therefore generally desirable to have those from other religious or non-religious sectors of society to join with rather than depart the core religion. Belief in the right religion will affect one's ability to survive in an afterlife. A recent poll of religious belief (Blanton, 2003) showed that 85% of the sample believed that Heaven was an actual place while 74% believed the same for Hell. The sample was taken by telephone survey of registered American voters and n=900.

In examining this system of beliefs associated with religion, a survey instrument was designed (appendix A) to closely duplicate the instrument used by the Fox News poll and applied to juveniles of high school age in order to see if the change in demographics (from registered voters) affected the way people form beliefs. Of the 26 juveniles that answered, the questions pertaining to Heaven and Hell, 92% believed Heaven to be an actual place and 85% believed the same for Hell. 41% of the juveniles polled believed in reincarnation, which is higher than the Fox News poll of 25% for the same belief, but I also asked about belief in an "afterlife," which Fox did not. That question returned a 69% belief among 26 juveniles out of 27 –one didn't answer the question.

That beliefs in Heaven are consistently higher than beliefs of Hell in both surveys and that more juveniles believed in an afterlife than not, suggests that their religious convictions offer a sense of hope that the current existence is not all there is.

The UFO/ETI movement, too, offers significant hope to its members. Frequent reference to a "Disclosure" event, when knowledge will be made available, truths will be revealed and the aliens will embrace those of humanity that are believers, was made within the sciforums.com group (crazymikey, 2004c; craterchains, 2004). There also seems to be a prevalent theme of not wanting to be alone in the universe among the UFO/ETI participants, and arguments for the existence of ETI often centers around the mathematical probability that intelligent life flourishes in the universe (crazymikey, 2004a).

Message to Humanity

Religion's message to humanity is establishment of core values to live by (Crapo, 2003; Nielsen, et al, 1988). In Judeo-Christian dogma, the Ten Commandments provide solid, straightforward laws to hold to and have done so for over two thousand years. Modern Christianity, particularly among Protestants, evokes catch phrases like, "what would Jesus do?" in attempting to guide the actions of followers. Indeed, the modern Christian message is often referred to as the "Word" that must be spread and told to all or as many as possible. The Christian prophecy found in the book of Revelations itself is a message to humanity, warning of dangers and signs to come. The pervasive theme in all of the world's major religions is a message to followers on how to live their lives appropriately. Warnings come in the form of past catastrophes wrought on humanity by the supernatural when the deities were less than pleased, such as with flood stories of antiquity like the Sumerian "Deluge", the Akkadian "Atrahasis" epic, the epic of "Gilgamesh" (Gabel, 2000), and the Judeo-Christian story of the Great Flood (Genesis 8). Each of these stories accounts the consequences that humanity can face if evil is succumbed to and kindness is absent.

The UFO/ETI movement also has a parallel of providing messages to humanity. In examining the evolution of the UFO culture, Sagan (1996) noted that the message evolved with current events. Initial "contact" with ETI by those that claimed it often culminated with warnings of the dangers of nuclear war, a very real and frightening technology at the time when UFOs were entering popular culture. The warnings of more contemporary times included themes of global warming, environmental destruction, and AIDS. Sagan concludes by noting that the alleged aliens were always in sync with the fashionable causes of our culture, but failed to provide any useful information in a timely manner, such as warnings about CFC in the ozone or AIDS in the 1970s when it may have been possible for humanity to do something about it.

Explanation of the Mystery

Religion provides explanation to humanity for mysteries of creation and afterlife (Crapo, 2003; Nielson, et al, 1988; Boyer, 2003). Ancient texts, such as the Enuma Elish (Gabel, 2000), the Babylonian genesis, provide supernatural explanations for the creation of the world. Trust in a deity and complete faith can ensure survival after death (John 3:16), suggesting that humanity is capable of living beyond the existence we perceive.

UFO/ETI is perhaps more eclectic in its ability to explain mystery since speculation by its proponents can include all religious texts as well as mythology associated with the UFO/ETI movement itself. I witnessed speculation and reoccurring themes that did just that in the Internet group that I participated with. Crazykikey suggested that the Mahabharat story of ancient India detailed accounts of nuclear war, and therefore provided evidence of ETI in our planet's antiquity since atomic energy had obviously not yet been harnessed by humanity. Great wars on other planets and moons within the solar system are used to explain the occurrences of chains of craters known as cantinas, since the idea that such orderly and perfect lines must be the work of intelligence rather than nature; orbital mechanics and laws of physics are rejected out-of-hand. The suggestion was even postulated that H. sapiens is not the product of evolution but rather the guidance and genetics of an alien race. The rejection of evolution in favor of design bears a striking resemblance to the arguments postulated by creationists of modern fundamentalist religion: accidents of this magnitude do not happen; therefore intelligent design must have occurred. Perhaps one of the more interesting examples of explanation of mystery is the speculation (and group acceptance) of the idea that religions of humanity are the work of ETI and that even Mary was artificially inseminated with alien sperm, an apparent combination of religious mythology with modern scientific thought.

Rejection of the Secular

For established religion, particularly for the fundamentalist sects, secular society is the antithesis of the religious agenda: abortion rights, banning prayer and the teaching of evolution in public schools, Ten Commandments monuments in courthouses, the loss of "traditional" family values, and other issues are considered by the Religious Right to be the evils of society without morality. The UFO/ETI movement, too, experiences an antithesis in government. The alleged crash at Roswell (Randle, 2000) is considered to be one of the primary examples of a government-engineered cover-up of a crashed and recovered UFO. Witnesses reported seeing the bodies of gray-colored beings in flight suit type uniforms on the desert floor with a scurry of military-types recovering the wreckage and bodies. The military recently declassified much of the actual operation that occurred in the region of New Mexico (Gildenberg, 2003), which was a secret until recently. Project High Dive, as it was called, involved the dropping of

anthropomorphic dummies to test aircraft escape and recovery gear. It was conducted in remote regions of the desert by lifting the dummies on high-altitude balloons then releasing. Recovery of the dummies involved a "recovery team" comprised of many people, vehicles and equipment and the whole thing must have looked strange indeed to the public. UFO/ETI proponents, however, have refused to accept these explanations and reject them based on the government and the military engaging in elaborate cover up and conspiracy.

In the sciforums.com Internet group, informants freely discussed the existence of a "shadow government" as a given matter of fact. That the government has secrets and keeps them is a logical assumption and easily accepted by most (Sagan, 1996) due to legitimate national security concerns. The contention of the UFO/ETI movement, however, is that the government is active in suppressing knowledge and those that know about UFO/ETI. It is popularly believed in the UFO/ETI movement that death threats and assassinations are a common tool of the government (Randle, 2000; Andrews, 1996; crazymikey, 2004c) and that disinformation agents have infiltrated the movement (craterchains, 2004b; Andrews, 1996) to misdirect or bring ridicule to the movement. Andrews cites many cases of murders "disguised as suicide" in an entire chapter of his book titled "Strange Suicides." Indeed, Andrews goes on to speculate in the same chapter that a thoroughly debunked hoaxer of UFO photographs, George Adamski, was indeed a disinformation agent of the CIA. These themes were very prevalent in the Internet group I participated with (crazymikey, 2004c; craterchains, 2004) and the proponents of the movement were steadfast in suggesting that assassinations occurred with various officials who came forward over the years to "disclose" the information about UFO/ETI.

The Less Obvious or Non-Existent Characteristics

Boyer (2003) notes that several characteristics are missing with regard to the UFO/ETI movement in spite of the striking similarities that exist between it and religious thought. Boyer cites a lack of "specific rituals directed at the aliens," a lack of "deep emotional commitment," "no significant change[s] in lifestyle," and a distinct lack of belief that "we are better because we believe in aliens (emphasis Boyer's)." Boyer also cites that the aliens fail to live up to the definition of "full-access strategic agents," which have access to information of value to deities such as actions of the populace, future actions, the contents of one's refrigerator, etc. Religious believers allow this strategic knowledge to affect social interactions and to guide morays that surround such actions as cheating, crime, kind acts, etc.

It can also be argued that hierarchical organizations that are found in many mainstream and even small religious groups are absent from the UFO/ETI movement. Religions have priests, clergy, shamans, etc. as well as a laity.

However, it is wholly possible that Boyer was not considering the UFO/ETI movement as it relates to modern culture rather than the manner in which traditional religions relate to traditional cultures. It could be that we are looking in all the wrong places for such things as ritual, emotional commitments and changes in lifestyles. Among the participants of sciforums.com that I observed, clear emotional commitment was noted in the personas that the actual participants took on. The obvious assumption is that an Internet persona need not be a direct reflection of an actual person, but that one is free to explore social interactions that would not normally be attempted in face-to-face discussions and conversations. This vehicle of expression might offer places to develop emotional commitments to ideas, concepts and belief systems. The Internet may also serve as a vehicle for new forms of ritual,

perhaps as yet identified. Internet communities have become accepted as " here to stay; (Hakim, et al, 1999) it has become more than a dynamic multimedia communication environment: it is a living culture."

While significant changes in lifestyle to meet the religious need of UFO/ETI are not immediately obvious within the movement as a whole, nor are full-access strategic agents completely identified with the aliens, the cults and sects of UFO/ETI, of which Heaven's Gate was an example of, clearly exist, even if as a minority within the movement as a whole. Cults such as the Raelians may not be fully accepted among most UFO/ETI proponents, but the doctrine of this group emerged in many speculations of UFO/ETI in the sciforums.com group. Discussions emerged regarding the Elohim, which the Raelians claim to be "those that come from the sky." Some of the same themes of alien influences on early Christian religion and "seeding" the planet with alien DNA rather than natural evolution of H. sapiens from earlier hominids was also correlated to the Raelian cult.

Finally, there emerges a new sect within the UFO/ETI movement that calls itself the Disclosure Project (Greer, 2001) and offers this description:

[A] nonprofit research project working to fully disclose the facts about UFOs, extraterrestrial intelligence, and classified advanced energy and propulsion systems. We have over 400 government, military, and intelligence community witnesses testifying to their direct, personal, first hand experience with UFOs, ETs, ET technology, and the cover-up that keeps this information secret.

This organization appears to be well run in that it has a clear primary agenda with one or more sub-agendas such as lobbying against weaponization of space. Moreover, this sect is self-funded, obtaining funds from sales of CDs, videos and other materials that Greer cites as proof of ETI visiting Earth. Greer demonstrates an ability to form coalitions of believers, spread his message, reinforce the beliefs of his followers and even takes advantage of the same types of tax-deductible donation methods of established churches. At the bottom of his web page, Greer quotes Margaret Meade: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed people can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

CONCLUSIONS

After reviewing available literature, initiating surveys on the subject, and participating with UFO/ETI proponents and skeptics in an Internet community, the question of whether the UFO/ETI movement is a religion remains, at best, unanswered. Clearly, religious characteristics exist, however, the coalescence and ritual found in mainstream religions is elusive in identification. Dr. Vilayanar S. Ramachandran is cited by Parker (1997) as having claimed to find the "god-module" within the human brain, noting by accident that some people with temporal lobe epilepsy have consistently experienced religious ecstasy during seizures. Boyer (2003) asserts that religious thought is the result of ontological templates of cognitive processes, that is to say, the way we represent objects or concepts, even entities, based on the way we learn to perceive and categorize the world around us. If one or both of these explanations for religious thought can be accepted, then a turn toward new concepts of religion that include modern concepts of science, hope and belief, such as that provided by UFO/ETI, may be expected.

To fully determine if the UFO/ETI movement is a religious experience, future research into religiosity of participants, specifically the extent to which mainstream or traditional religion is able to satisfy

needs or fails to do so, may be warranted. In addition, examination of rituals in the context of new cultural domains such as the Internet should be conducted in order to establish new definitions or standards for ritual practices that can be applied in this largely non-physical realm.

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