

Secular Myth, Sacred Spacemen: Move over, Jesus; an Alien Soteriology abducts the Christian Cosmos

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Abstract

A new mythos is emerging—that of the extraterrestrial as savior. For centuries, humankind has looked to celestial bodies for deliverance from worldly strife. In biblical times, these saviors were the stars themselves. Curious lights in the sky continue to hold humanity's gaze, but rather than luminous orbs light-years away, many people claim that the saviors of the human race have descended from the stars. With their advanced intellect and technology, these beings are believed to be able to aid a spiritually backwards humanity from self-obliteration and ecological foibles. Many go so far as to worship extraterrestrials outright in what are known as UFO Religions, yet not all members of the human race welcome the idea of alien life forms with open arms. In the conventional Christian conception of the cosmos, Jesus is understood as the lone savior of humanity, leaving some Christians to reject the notion of extraterrestrials as saviors and the notion of extraterrestrials altogether. Other followers of Christ, however, are embracing the possibility of life elsewhere. This paper explores the variety of ways in which ideas about the possibility of alien life is being challenged, incorporated, and rejected by Christianity, as well as more "secular" writers who nonetheless glimpse some religious connections here and even point to the Bible as evidence for their claims. Many view extraterrestrials in a salvific manner. These "sacred" spacemen are becoming a modern, "secular" mythology—even within Christianity itself.

1. Introduction

Nestled in the Book of Isaiah, the passage below follows the prophet's ridicule of manmade objects of worship. It celebrates the surpassing power and wisdom of God:

Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing.¹

Their eyes fixed on the firmament, the ancient Israelites often paid homage to the heavenly host, rather than the God who created them. Many modern-day followers of Christ argue that humanity is still looking to lights in the sky for deliverance, though the perception of these sacred orbs has been updated to suit modern sensibilities. For no longer does humankind worship stationary spheres, eons away; instead, these saviors have descended—in disc-shaped craft. Entities from distant star systems zip across the nighttime sky, the backdrop that once held the gaze of humanity. Most today regard these beings as spiritual and technological messiahs able to solve the planet's environmental conundrums, save the human race from self-obliteration, and even shed light on life's biggest questions, like the origins and purpose of existence. Awestruck and arms outstretched, the peoples of Isaiah's day fell to their knees at the vastness and splendor of space. Still, humanity's eyes are immovable. Still, it pays homage. Humanity tirelessly seeks salvation in the stars.

Of course, not everyone worships space aliens, yet countless *do*, unabashedly. Since the 1950s, whole religions have been built on contact with flying saucers and their occupants, and these “UFO religions,” as they are called, constitute some of today’s fastest growing faiths. But the presence of UFO religions is indicative of a much wider interest in extraterrestrial life forms, for otherworldly organisms have also captivated the consciousness of the masses. The shelves of every book or video game shop are rife with life from far-away galaxies and worlds. Likewise, the movie industry has spacemen speeding towards Earth either to threaten or to deliver Earth’s humble hominids. But these creatures do not merely make for riveting plotlines; many individuals believe that, should aliens exist, they could impart spiritual and technological wisdom beyond reckoning. So while not everyone venerates beings from beyond, all eyes—be they hopeful, fearful, or downright inquisitive—are on the skies. And many are convinced we too are being watched.

The existence of life beyond Earth is a certainty to those who have encountered extraterrestrials and their innovative craft. A survey recently commissioned for the National Geographic Channel revealed more than 30% of Americans claim extraterrestrials have visited Earth, and 10% say they have spotted a UFO.² Specifics of these interactions vary tremendously from one person to the next. A multitude of witnesses describe brilliant lights jetting across the blue beyond or hovering silently over the shadowy countryside. Others are yanked from their bedcovers in the cover of night only to suffer painful experimentation at the hands of entities hailing from other worlds. A handful of witnesses board alien spacecraft and traverse the cosmos alongside humanity’s “Star Brothers.”³ Just as diverse as the experiences themselves, reactions to these close encounters range from optimism to sheer panic. Interestingly enough, there is a striking correlation between the experience and the reaction: not all seemingly traumatic encounters result in a fearful response, and the opposite is equally true. While some emerge from an abduction episode feeling traumatized, exploited, or abused, “A surprising number of abductees reverse their attitude by the time they depart from the ship and actually regard the experience in a positive light.”⁴ Alien abduction, a presumably horrific event, is regarded by most as little more than a necessary nocturnal hiccup to better the human condition.

Despite what are written off as a few unfortunate encounters, society too generally regards extraterrestrials in a salvific manner. But where does this budding alien soteriology fit into the Christian cosmos? Since its conception, the mainstream Christian belief has been that Jesus, the Son of God, is the lone savior of humanity, but thanks to the alien and UFO phenomenon, the myth of the Christian messiah is being reworked and replaced with a new, super-technological one. Christianity’s savior for two millennia is being asked to move over or hop on an alien spacecraft—or else. The paper at hand will first introduce some secular writers who apply religious meaning to the scientific evidence for extraterrestrials and point to the Bible as evidence for their claims. The incorporation of traditionally Christian doctrines and concepts into UFO religions will follow, and lastly, the variety of ways in which ideas about the possibility of alien life are being challenged, incorporated, and rejected by Christianity will be explored. Each of these will be used to show how “sacred” spacemen are becoming a modern, “secular” mythology—even within Christianity itself.

2. A New Mythos Emerges

Starwatchers throughout the ages have contemplated the notion of life on other worlds and its possible repercussions, but fascination with the subject has escalated over the past sixty years alongside advances in astronomy. The newfound abilities to peer into deep space and kick up moon dust on Earth’s silvery satellite were no longer confined to speculative science and science fiction. Like never before, the prospect of advanced civilizations inhabiting foreign frontiers began to populate mankind’s imagination, and consequently, literature abounds on the issue of aliens. Penned in every manner possible is the query: Are we alone? And the inevitable follow-up: If not, what then? By means of literary analysis, the author will explore this topic particularly with the traditional understanding of Jesus as savior in mind and how this myth is being incorporated into “secular” religions and being reshaped within Christianity itself. Because so much has been written on the matter of aliens in recent years, a literary analysis is the most fitting approach. An analysis of what advocates on all sides say and their evidence for such claims, including scholarly and non-scholarly sources, that is, publications authored with a distinct bias will be examined in the pages to follow. Whatever the view, the Bible seems to play an important part in UFO beliefs, so biblical investigation will also be necessary. Much has been said about aliens in recent years, and questions about what is in store for Christianity and the Christian conception of the cosmos are plaguing earthlings everywhere.

Before proceeding, an elucidation of the word “myth” is required. “Myth” comes from the ancient Greek word “mythos.” To the ancient Greeks, myths were related to a special mode of speaking, often related to poetry. Myths were a means by which to explain life’s deepest ponderings: origins, purpose, afterlife, family, nature, and so on. They were sacred stories that explained the unexplainable. Hence, the author’s employment of the term is as a meaningful narrative that helps to elucidate the world or humankind, irrespective of truth or falsity. To prove or disprove a religious perspective concerning extraterrestrials is not the author’s contention; rather, it is to demonstrate that the long-held Christian myths are being exchanged with super-technological ways of understanding humankind’s place in the cosmos. Whether it is ancient Greece or modern America, new myths explain new circumstances. The discovery of things such as atomic science, planets elsewhere in the universe, and the alleged UFO phenomenon have raised new questions and, therefore, new myths. In the words of author James A. Herrick, “We are a culture awash in new knowledge and thus a culture hungry for new myths to manage the deluge.”⁵ The old myths do not suffice in the space age, nor do antiquity’s saviors, as some would assert.

Some myths spawn new religions. This is at the heart of spiritualities based on contact with extraterrestrials and UFOs. Whereas existing religions may incorporate extraterrestrial data into their theology, UFO religions are built on the myth of the extraterrestrial. Nevertheless, scholar Mikael Rothstein notes that “today people from many different faiths have incorporated a belief in UFOs into otherwise non-UFO belief systems,”⁶ Christianity included. He also observes that while “some will keep apart their belief in UFOs, and, say, Jesus as savior [...] others will merge the two mythical spheres into one.”⁷ Fundamentalist Christians may reject the notion of extraterrestrials as technological saviors or reject the notion of extraterrestrials altogether. In this conception, there is not enough proverbial room in the cosmos for other planets to harbor life. Jesus alone is savior of souls and earthlings are God’s prized creation—one and only, not one of many. Other Christians, however, incorporate an additional savior mythos into their existing theology without hesitation. Such individuals may see beings from beyond as working in conjunction with Christ in his Earth-saving endeavors or may envision Jesus himself as an extraterrestrial.

No matter on which side of the fence one stands concerning the place (or lack thereof) of extraterrestrials in conventional Christian theology, the Bible is regarded as holding some kind of solution to the UFO enigma. Several assert that, like the universe, the scriptures are teeming with spaceships and space aliens. The appearance of flying saucers in biblical times has been championed by countless ufologists, like Erich von Däniken, Zecharia Sitchin, and R. L. Dione, who have argued so-called “ancient astronauts” visited the Earth long ago and were erroneously conceived of as gods because of their extensive technological knowhow. All of the world’s faiths originated from these interplanetary visitors, and so too did humankind’s holy texts. The Bible, therefore, is a record of alien-human, not divine-human, interaction. From Genesis to Revelation, the myths contained within its pages are stripped of all things metaphysical. The creation account, prophetic visions, and the life and miracles of Jesus are seen as the handiwork of “divine” scientists from outer space. Though the Bible is highly revered, its myths are reinterpreted using a contemporary point of view, one that writes ETs in, and God out.

Though von Däniken, Sitchin, and Dione are not adherents of UFO religions, flying saucer faiths approach the Bible and Christian doctrines in a similar fashion. Quite a few UFO religions have incorporated Eastern religious notions, such as karma and reincarnation, but the UFO movement looks heavily to the Christian scriptures as evidence for its claims and modernizes the classic myths. Even though biblical myths were “conceived in a distinctly pre-ufological context,” says Rothstein, once they are “told in a modern, Western environment,” they easily relate to “UFO stories.”⁸ Members of the Raëlian Church, for instance, believe the Bible is laden with UFO visitations and offer their own spin on traditional hermeneutics, such as the meaning of “Elohim” found in Genesis. While Elohim is understood in mainstream Christianity as a reference to God, Raëlians assert the term refers to extraterrestrial scientists who created mankind. Similarly, the Bible played a significant role for the founders of Heaven’s Gate, who saw themselves as the two prophets described in the eleventh chapter of the book of Revelation. UFO religions tend to have novel conceptions of the Jesus mythos as well. George King of the Aetherius Society encountered Master Jesus, who, far from the dusty streets Judea, now resides on Venus in an alternate dimension. In much the same manner as Däniken, Sitchin, and Dione, UFO religionists look to the Bible for answers, though it is not seen as a sacred text.

UFO groups tend not only to reinterpret Christian myths directly, but to also rework some of Christianity’s broader teachings. Themes commonplace in Christianity, such as apocalypticism, millenarianism, demonology, sin, and salvation can all be found in UFO religions. The basic premises of UFO religions are as follows. Man falls short and is in need of a savior. “The human race has sinned,” says Christopher Partridge, “in the sense that we have, in particular, not cared for the Earth, misused the knowledge we have, and developed technologies capable of destroying ourselves and the planet.”⁹ Enter mankind’s spiritual and technological messiahs, able to liberate and uplift a spiritually and evolutionarily backward humanity from its current predicaments. These altruistic beings have traveled to Earth to warn of impending disasters and to offer help and protection, not only from ecological and

technological foibles, but from not-so-friendly alien races bent on mankind's destruction. Much like God and the biblical prophets of antiquity, aliens approach specially selected individuals and commission them to act as messengers, and unless humanity follows the direction of these apostles, it faces certain doom. The human race is in danger of destroying the planet and even upsetting a balance of cosmic universal forces, yet it has the ability to usher in a new age, a new planet under alien rule.

A few clarifications are in order. In all fairness, sin, salvation, demonology, and the like are by no means exclusive to Christianity, for most of the world's faiths invoke such concepts, albeit, of course, in varying degrees. Indeed, one could argue the incorporation of such themes merely shows that UFO religions are *religions*, and nothing more. At any rate, demonstrating how spiritualities centered on contact with UFOs are legitimate religions is not the aim of this paper. The author's focus is instead on the springboard of these fascinating faiths: the myth of extraterrestrials as salvific figures. Just as for ufologists like von Däniken, Sitchin, and Dione, a space-age soteriology has emerged in UFO religions, devoid of the divine. UFO religions, then, are one example among many of how the conventional understanding of Jesus as humanity's lone savior is being replaced by a newer model.

Is there room for more than one savior in the Christian cosmos? What do the scriptures say about life elsewhere? Such queries are furrowing the brows of theologians across the globe today. Although few have seriously considered the theological consequences of UFOs, some scholars are genuinely exploring these issues. Marie I. George is a case in point. In a recent article, George investigates the possible theological implications should aliens exist: would beings on other planets need a savior all their own? or was Jesus' atonement all-encompassing? She ultimately concludes that the existence of intelligent life somewhere else in the universe would not compromise the core teachings of the faith. Yet other contemporary followers of Christ see theology and ufology as diametrically opposed, dismissing the notion of extraterrestrials as a whole as sacrilegious nonsense. Joseph Jordan and David Ruffino interpret the abduction and UFO enigma as part and parcel of an elaborate satanic plot to undermine the Christian message. Whilst scientists and devotees alike scour the skies in bewilderment, Christians the world over are fumbling through the scriptures for answers as to how exactly extraterrestrials would fit into Christ's redemptive plan and method.

Spurred along by developments in astronomy, aliens have become a hot topic in recent years. As a consequence, "We needed new myths to match new ideas, new discoveries, new technologies, a new way of life,"¹⁰ states author James Herrick. In the space era, the myth of the extraterrestrial is sovereign. This modern, "secular" mythology is, paradoxically, closely entwined with Christianity's past. But classical Christian scriptures and doctrines are given an atypical twist: gone is the God of humanity's creation and salvation, and in his place are the messiahs of tomorrow, wielding unfathomable wisdom. And whether or not extraterrestrials actually exist, they have infiltrated every level of society by "abducting" our consciousness. Most abductees, both literally (physical snatching by aliens) and figuratively (mental preoccupation with aliens), view their experience in a positive light, while others regard the phenomenon as dangerous and demonic. Yet even those who shun the idea of life on other worlds have incorporated this secular mythos into their belief system—after all, myths need not involve the supernatural. Thus, the myth of the extraterrestrial transcends religious boundaries, making it palatable to all persons, whether religious, irreligious, or somewhere in between.

3. The "Gods" have Descended

One would be hard-pressed to investigate the topic of aliens and ufology without encountering the name Erich von Däniken time after time. Von Däniken is famous for popularizing the ancient astronaut hypothesis, as put forth in his 1968 bestseller *Chariots of the Gods? Unsolved Mysteries of the Past*. Since then, his work has been recast twice in the form of television documentaries; once in 1972 and again in 2010. In each of these mediums, von Däniken argues that the Earth was visited in its distant past by sophisticated extraterrestrials. These so-called "ancient astronauts" influenced the development of human cultures and technologies and were mistaken by primitive peoples as gods. Signs of their visitations were left behind in the form of "evidence that can be seen" and "evidence that can be read."¹¹ Attributed to humankind's space neighbors are architectural mementos, such as the Peruvian Nazca lines, the Egyptian pyramids, and much, much more. Wrongly understood as gods, these otherworldly travelers are also deemed responsible for the world's religions, and ancient religious texts are seen as nothing more than a record of these alien visitations.

Even though the world's sacred texts and experiences are not regarded as divine in origin, they are nonetheless held in high esteem by von Däniken. As to be expected of visitors from another world, many South American deities are said to have come from the heavens and subsequently returned there. Descended from the stars, Quetzalcoatl is a

prime example.¹² Likewise, ancient Hindu texts record “evidence of gods come to earth,” and their poems speak repeatedly of “UFO-like vehicles which fly to great heights on beams of lights.”¹³ Related to the purpose at hand, strange flying craft are described in the Bible too, such as the celestial chariot that confronted Ezekiel. In the first chapter of the book of Ezekiel, the prophet is said to have beheld in a vision angels operating God’s throne-chariot. The curious vessel is described as having wheels within wheels and able to speed “to and fro, like a flash of lightning.”¹⁴ Just as in the South American descriptions of visitors from the stars and the Indian accounts of sky vehicles, von Däniken accredits Ezekiel’s vision to ancient cosmonauts.

High-profile ufologist Zecharia Sitchin perceives no conflict between science and the Bible, especially in terms of evolution, and Genesis plays a lead role in what he understands as alien fertilization experiments. The creation account of Genesis 1:27 speaks of God creating humanity in “his own image.” Sitchin couples this with Genesis 6:1-8 where the “sons of God” (extraterrestrials) marry the “daughters of men” (subhuman women), thereby advancing the evolution of the human race. Putting it differently, extraterrestrials fashioned humans in their own likeness by means of genetic engineering and intermarriage, mixing our primitive genes “with *their* advanced genes.”¹⁵ Without alien intervention, the evolutionary process from “hominid just learned to walk to Thinking Man (*Homo sapiens*)” would have taken “millions or tens of millions of years,” but innovative space scientists shaved this down to “some 300,000 years.”¹⁶ While portions of Genesis 1 and 6 have remained points of contention amongst theologians throughout the centuries, the idea that man was made by aliens has not been one of them. But Sitchin, like Däniken, turns traditional understandings of the text on their heads.

Another proponent of the ancient astronaut hypothesis who draws a connection between the Christian scriptures and extraterrestrials is R. L. Dione. For Dione, all the miracles of the Bible can be explained in terms of flying saucer technology piloted by “God”—a super-technological, not supernatural, being. From the star of Bethlehem to the miracles and resurrection of Jesus, UFOs and their occupants have orchestrated it all. In *God Drives a Flying Saucer*, Dione champions several other unconventional biblical interpretations. They include heaven is a super-technological society;¹⁷ Ezekiel’s visions were hallucinations caused by UFOs;¹⁸ and the angel Gabriel hypnotized Mary and injected her with a hypodermic needle containing God’s sperm.¹⁹ As evidence, the author outlines similarities between modern-day sightings and those scattered throughout scripture. Over and again, the occurrence of strange buzzing sounds, luminous clouds, and “angel hair,” a peculiar substance trailing behind spacecraft that disappears on contact, are rationalized as support for alien intervention long ago.

For von Däniken, Sitchin, and Dione, the Bible is looked upon with special reverence, yet all of the extraordinary events inscribed on its pages are seen as the work of sophisticated space visitors. To von Däniken, extraterrestrials visited our forebears and were mistakenly thought of as “gods,” only to become the catalysts of the world’s religions. To Sitchin, the biblical creation narrative documents the handiwork of intergalactic scientists, not the traditional God Almighty. And to Dione, Jesus, born from artificial insemination, was an ordinary man, whose miracles were actually due to mind manipulation caused by alien technology. In each of the cases outlined above, the Bible, Christianity, and even God are divested of all traces of divinity. God is a physical entity, who remains all-powerful in the eyes of humankind because of his technological superiority alone. In this way, as leading ufologist Christopher Partridge notes, the ancient astronaut hypothesis “undermines religion, in that God, spiritual beings, providence, and miracles are all explained in physical terms.”²⁰ Proponents of the ancient astronaut hypothesis reinterpret and replace traditional Christian myths with secular, spacemen narratives.

4. Conversations with Cosmic Masters

It must be noted that von Däniken and the other ancient astronaut supporters are neither UFO religionists nor do they claim any extraterrestrial guidance. Their suppositions are derived from indirect contact with alien life forms, which left behind architectural and textual calling signs in the distant past. Contrariwise, from their origins, UFO religions are built on direct interaction with such beings. The construction of a flying saucer faith typically begins not with a secondhand dealing, centuries ago, but with a one-one-one encounter whereby the individual is commissioned to spread an alien gospel of sorts to help bring humanity to a higher rung on the spiritual, technological, and evolutionary ladder. Follow-up communications can take the form of telepathy, automatic writing, trance, channeling, or even abductions. Many extraterrestrial “contactees” used their experiences to establish new religious movements. Heaven’s Gate, the Aetherius Society, the Unarius Academy of Science, and the Raëlian Church all began with personal encounters with extraterrestrials in some individualized form or fashion.²¹

The earliest UFO religions were established in the 1950s. However, pinpointing a definite date of origin is problematic because many of the beliefs and practices adopted by flying saucer religions existed well before the

twentieth century. The notion of ascended masters, for instance, is commonly embraced by UFO religionists, yet this teaching finds its roots in the Theosophical (Divine Wisdom) movement of the 1800s, while Theosophy itself dates back to antiquity. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for UFO religionists to borrow teachings from a range of religious traditions. A blending of Eastern, “New Age,” and Christian beliefs and practices is typical. Automatic writing and channeling, as an example, are usually attributed to the New Age movement, yet practitioners of UFO faiths also incorporate such things as reincarnation and karma, all the while drawing on biblical passages for support. Because they integrate teachings from a number of sources, determining when exactly UFO religions started is a challenge. But the modern UFO movement, that is, faiths founded on contact with UFOs and/or their occupants, began in the 1950s.

Flying saucer faiths are not only an amalgam of various religious ideas, for they also tend towards the secular and scientific. In fact, some of these organizations do not consider themselves religions at all. Raëlianism understands itself as an “Intelligent Design Theory for atheists” and thereby “offers a rational solution to the age-old debate between God-believers and evolutionists.”²² Similarly, the Aetherius Society is cited as saying, “This is not a new religion [...] it’s a spiritual path to enlightenment and the cosmic evolution of mankind.”²³ Though some members of the UFO movement lean towards the science-secularism-atheism end of the spectrum, a common thread throughout is the merging of science *with* religion. By “the joining of science and spirit,” the Unarius Academy of Science hopes to usher in “a new golden age of logic and reason.”²⁴ Wherever these organizations stand on the existence or nonexistence of the divine, they are, nonetheless, usually classified as religions in that they share key characteristics with the world’s faiths: prescribed ritual, an ethical system, devotion to the sacred, a shared set of beliefs, spiritual development, the need for salvation, and, of course, a mythology.

Here, the myth of the extraterrestrial reigns supreme. UFO religionists see these beings in a salvific light, much like the ascended masters of Theosophy. In the Theosophical tradition, a spiritual movement based on obtaining esoteric knowledge of god, ascended masters are persons who have “mastered” the problems of human living and “ascended” to a higher spiritual plane where they now seek to impart divine wisdom to specially chosen intermediaries. Christopher Partridge observes an interesting twist on the notion of ascended masters given by UFO religionists: while the masters of Theosophy have originated on our planet and ascended, the masters of UFO religions “have originated on another planet and *descended* to Earth.”²⁵ Still, the premise is the same: fully evolved beings, be they human or no, ascended or descended, seek to impart wisdom to humanity in order to lead it into a new age of peace and global community. For members of the Aetherius Society, the “Cosmic” or “Ascended Masters” seek to share their ancient wisdom with the masses for the betterment of mankind: “They come with great hope, offering mystical tools of white magic that can give you the spiritual power available only to advanced adepts centuries ago.”²⁶ Descended from the stars, the “ascended” masters of UFO spiritualities come with a message of peace and hope to redeem humanity from its current state.

The fact that humanity needs uplifting from anything says something about how UFO religionists view the nature of human beings: we fall short and are in need of salvation from space. The human condition was far from desirable for the thirty-nine ill-fated members of Heaven’s Gate, who were seeking, in the words of one of the group’s founders, Marshall Applewhite, to “rid themselves of human behavior, human activity, [and] human thinking.”²⁷ According to Heaven’s Gate’s webpage, the human existence is valuable only as a “*stepping stone* between the animal kingdom and the Evolutionary Kingdom Level Above Human.”²⁸ In the end, spiritual transcendence could only be brought on by leaving their restrictive earthly containers and joining extraterrestrial passersby trailing behind the comet Hale-Bopp. Thus, in order to reach “Heaven” before the closing of its “Gate,” in late March of 1997, most of the group’s members committed suicide. Central to Heaven’s Gate, and any UFO religion for that matter, is the belief that contact with extraterrestrial entities is the way to salvation and improvement.

An alien soteriology usually goes hand-in-hand with an alien eschatology, for UFO religions and abduction spiritualities often have elaborate theories about the fate of humankind. UFO eschatology (end-times theology) is consistently apocalyptic. The human race, in its current spiritually immature state, is the problem. Extraterrestrial entities offer help and protection from impending disasters brought on by our ecological, technological, and spiritual carelessness. Yet the basic premise of abductions, that is, being taken against one’s will and being held captive, has led some abductees to question the alien agenda altogether, believing their altruism is a charade to hide sinister intentions of world domination or human exploitation.²⁹ A handful of UFO religionists reconcile these conflicting agendas by envisioning multiple alien races; some motivated by altruism and others set on raping and torturing. The notion of inferior and superior alien races weighs heavily in Nuwaubian theology. Oft classified as a UFO religion, the Nuwaubian Nation of Moors mixes the politics of Black Nationalism with ideas about the alien origin of humanity, as they hold that Blacks are otherworldly descendants of God who have been at odds with their morally and spiritually inferior counterparts since biblical times and will continue to do so until the end of time.³⁰ Warring alien races or conflicting agendas—wherever humanity turns, apocalypse is imminent in UFO eschatology.

However, extraterrestrial eschatology is predominantly a positive, millenarian one. Motivated by deep salvific concerns, benevolent extraterrestrials have come either to rescue the human race from worldly cataclysm or to help humanity transform the world and usher in a new age of peace and enlightenment. Marshall Applewhite of Heaven's Gate embraced an evacuation scenario closely resembling Christian rapture beliefs. Applewhite promised those who follow his teachings would avoid the "staring over" of "this planet."³¹ In this view, the return of the messiah, an interstellar space traveler, occurs *before* an age of peace. Much like Christian premillennialism, the era of prosperity and return of the savior are not brought about by human potential. Yet other UFO religionists believe humankind will usher in a new age of tranquility and the return of its space saviors. Members of Unarius foresee the human race as being invited to enter a network of thirty-two intergalactic civilizations that promote "peace and harmony" throughout the cosmos.³² Similar to Christian postmillennialism, Unarius believes humanity is capable of ushering in a new age, and *after* doing so, it can join the interstellar brotherhood. Whether "premillennialist" or "postmillennialist" in nature, both end-times accounts ultimately hinge on saviors from space, not Jesus.

As is the case with the ancient astronaut hypothesizers, UFO religionists interpret the Jesus mythos from a ufological perspective. UFO religions reject a traditional take on Christ and often claim to hold the truth about his life and times. The Raëlian movement is highly critical of established religion, particularly Christianity, yet this "atheistic religion"³³ espouses a correct understanding about Christ's resurrection. Claude Vorilhon, the founder of the Raëlian Church, crossed paths with an alien forty years ago and was instructed that much of the Bible consists of "poetic babblings," including the resurrection of Jesus which was accomplished by alien cloning technology rather than by the power of God.³⁴ The Unarius Academy champions a similar view, whereby Jesus is stripped of all divinity and salvific ability. "Slashing through 2,000 years of Christian fanaticism," the Unarius website states explicitly, "The true teachings of Jesus, updated into the language of the twenty-first century, are available through the science of Unarius." Unarius thus offers "the true biography" of Jesus, who was betrothed to Mary Magdalene and lived as an average man. However, per the Apostle Paul, these truths were covered up by Jesus' disciples following the crucifixion and eventually lost over the years, until Jesus and Mary were reincarnated as the founders of Unarius.³⁵ Far from the traditional understanding of Christ, theirs is a "secular" mythology that modernizes the myth of Jesus and removes his divinity.

It is worth noting to what extent Christ and Christianity play in UFO religions. In one means or another, Jesus finds his way into all the major flying saucer religions, and each bears exclusive truth claims about his life, death, and resurrection, which they assert have been misconstrued throughout the centuries by overzealous Christians. Moreover, at least to some degree, every one of these captivating faiths points to the Bible for support, and sometimes their founders go so far as to equate themselves with the figures inscribed on its pages, Jesus included. UFO religions and abduction spiritualities incorporate Christian scriptures, and larger Christian themes too, like demonology, millennialism, apocalypticism, sin, and salvation. UFO eschatology and Christian beliefs about rapture and the coming age of peace bear striking similarities, and both are derived from the premise that mankind is sinful and in need of a savior. Yet this is where traditional Christianity and the modern UFO movement diverge: regardless of the Christian undertones, UFO religions tend to be staunchly atheistic, seeing extraterrestrials, not Christ the God-Man, as humanity's saviors. Even though Jesus is ascended to the rank of master by UFO religionists, he is descended from the position of God, but in the conventional Christian view, Jesus is second to none.

5. The Cosmic Christ

By no means confined to the minds of ancient astronaut enthusiasts and UFO religionists, the topic of aliens is preoccupying curious Christians everywhere as well, including those in Western North Carolina. Published recently in the *Asheville Citizen-Times*,³⁶ the Reverend Billy Graham was asked by one inquisitive believer, "[I]f there is intelligent life on other planets (as some scientists think), should we try to send missionaries someday to tell them about Jesus?" The well-respected evangelist first responded with uncertainty as to whether or not extraterrestrials exist: "Are there intelligent beings elsewhere in the universe? The Bible doesn't say one way or the other." He then reassured his readers that if such entities do exist and have "turned against God (as we have)," God "will provide the means for their salvation [...] by sending His Son from heaven to [them]" and "could also be trusted to provide the means for them to hear the message of salvation in a way they can understand." The possibility of life on other worlds and the theological repercussions thereof are plaguing Christians across the globe, and as the reader shall see, not all agree with the good Reverend.

The possibility of alien life forms is presenting concerns for the wellbeing of Christianity overall. Catholic theologian Marie I. George notes in a recent article that some "maintain that the discovery of intelligent life on other

planets would be detrimental to Christianity” because “the specialness of the human race (and planet Earth) would be lost,”³⁷ meaning if sentient aliens are part of God’s creation, then mankind cannot be the focal point of his created universe. Yet George herself ultimately concludes that the existence of life elsewhere would not cause the “collapse of Christianity,” nor would it compromise the specialness of humanity; rather it would simply mean God has “several children,” whom he loves equally.³⁸ In fact, other Catholics have embraced the notion of alien life in recent years. In 2008, according to Brandon Keim of ABC News, the Vatican’s chief astronomer and papal science adviser asserted that the Catholic Church would welcome extraterrestrials with open arms.³⁹ “And far from being weakened by contact,” says Keim, “Christianity would adapt. Its doctrines would be interpreted anew.” In other words, the *myths* upon which Christianity was constructed, namely that the Earth and its inhabitants are God’s sole creation, would be replaced with new ways of understanding mankind’s place in the cosmos.

Alien contact would raise a number of theological conundrums as well. The foremost challenge posed to Christianity would involve the Incarnation of Christ and the scope of its redemptive value: would the second person of the Trinity need to hop from world to world taking on the form of every intelligent race across the cosmos, dying, and resurrecting? According to George, “It is only the God-Man, Jesus Christ, who is capable of making infinite satisfaction for his human debt.”⁴⁰ She points to Romans 5:15-19 for support, which speaks of the correlation between sin coming into the world through one man (Adam) and salvation coming into the world through another man (Christ). “ETIs [extraterrestrial intelligences] have no share in that heritage,” affirms George, “This passage repeats over and over the correspondence of one fallen human to one human redeemer. This one-to-one correspondence between fallen and redeemer would be lost if fallen ETIs were also to have Christ as redeemer.”⁴¹ Thus, “a member of the fallen ETI race—and not a member of Adam’s race—would have to rightfully make reparation for the sin of that race for true justice to be served.”⁴² However, George believes that Jesus’ redemptive efforts were once and final, able to cleanse the sins of all intelligent beings, since other passages, like Colossians 1:18-20, indicate that Jesus’ “saving power” is cosmic in reach.⁴³ As savior of *all* the fallen, he need not take on multiple forms to redeem every intelligent race planet-by-planet.

But aliens might not even need a savior to begin with. That is to say, if extraterrestrials have not sinned, remaining in a state of grace like Adam and Eve prior to their rebellion, then they would not have or need a savior. George remarks on this as well, stating that “unfallen ETIs fit poorly into God’s plan for the universe which centers on Jesus Christ. After all, Christ would be neither their savior nor the most suitable role model for them.”⁴⁴ Furthermore, Romans 8:18-23 states that all of creation “groans” under the curses pronounced in the third chapter of Genesis. After Adam and Eve sinned, everything started falling apart, literally. Not only does the human race suffer, but every living creature, the planet itself, and the entire universe are chained under the curse of entropy and decay, eagerly waiting to be released. Hence, if God created the universe, as Genesis espouses, then he would have created aliens too, meaning they would be no exception to the Fall and its woes. It is also worth noting that if there is any validity to abduction claims where victims report excruciating physical examinations and apparent disregard for human suffering, then the extraterrestrial perpetrators are exhibiting fallen, or sinful, behavior, which, in the traditional Christian view, would necessitate redemption through Jesus.

Some followers of Christ invoke a metaphysical approach to alien life forms, arguing extraterrestrials are not extra-terrestrial at all, but fellow Earth-dwellers that reside alongside us, undetected, in a nonphysical realm. Authors of the work titled *Unholy Communion*, Joseph Jordan and David Ruffino, propose just that. Former members of an organization dedicated to investigating UFOs and extraterrestrials from a scientific standpoint, Jordan and Ruffino noticed a recurring spiritual element to claims of contact: these entities and their craft defy all known laws of physics by moving through solid objects and vanishing and appearing instantly.⁴⁵ They liken these entities to angels, which exhibit similar capabilities. As “messengers” of God, angels are spirit beings that can materialize and dematerialize into physical forms when their assigned task calls for it, as in they can “appear out of thin air.”⁴⁶ For Jordan and Ruffino, “aliens” resemble angelic beings, not only in terms of substance, but in demeanor as well.

More specifically, Jordan and Ruffino interpret the alien abduction phenomenon as the work of fallen angels determined to demolish God’s plan of salvation. The Bible teaches that some angels, including Satan, chose to rebel against God.⁴⁷ Cast down to Earth, they became fallen angels, and humanity has been ensnared in an epic battle between holy and demonic forces ever since. Ephesians exhorts believers to “stand against the wiles of the devil,” since there is a war going on in the unseen or “heavenly” realms.⁴⁸ And 2 Corinthians warns that the Devil’s primary ploy is deception: “Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.”⁴⁹ Based on these passages and on abduction accounts, Jordan and Ruffino believe that Satan’s fallen messengers are masquerading as “aliens.” They point out that the actions of supposed extraterrestrials are not in-line with their words. Snatching men, women, and children in the cover of night only to be poked, prodded, and raped, these beings simultaneously purport to be humanity’s rescuers.⁵⁰ To Jordan and Ruffino, these encounters come not from benevolent beings hoping to elevate the human

condition by means of superior science and spirituality; instead, they are much more sinister and self-serving, out to proclaim a gospel all their own, where “extraterrestrials” are the saviors of the human race, not Jesus.

Are beings from beyond compatible with the Christian message? Billy Graham and Marie George believe so. According to Graham, the Bible is silent on the actuality of aliens, yet he is certain God would provide the means for their salvation should they exist. Though she takes a slightly different approach, George draws a similar conclusion. She maintains that the scriptures do have something to say about the possibility of life on other worlds and the subsequent theological implications, and in the end, she contends that while alien life forms do not fit readily into the Christian conception of the cosmos, their existence would not contradict any of the religion’s central tenets. Even so, not all Christians share these sentiments. Though Jordan and Ruffino dismiss the notion of extraterrestrial life, they point out that God did, indeed, create other intelligent beings known as angels, and they attribute the UFO and alien abduction phenomena to demonic entities. The issue of aliens is being challenged, incorporated, and rejected by Christians the world over, and when it comes to whether or not theology and ufology coincide, views are as varied as the cosmos is deep.

As previously noted, the discovery of life elsewhere would not pose a threat to Christianity as a whole because the religion would adapt to survive. And, in fact, it already has. Consider Copernicus, Galileo, and Darwin—surely extraterrestrials are no different. Many followers of Christ already embrace the notion of life on other planets. These individuals find no tension between their belief system and the possibility of other advanced civilizations. In this conception, whether through a series of incarnations or once and final, God would provide the means for the salvation of his “other children.” Some Christians, on the other hand, find the notion of beings inhabiting a distant star system, not only preposterous, but satanic and “secular,” as in devoid of the Judeo-Christian God. Such believers understand UFO and abduction events in accordance with Christian demonology and argue that they are here to corrode the Christian message from the inside out. Yet it is worth noting that even those who fervently deny the possibility of alien life forms have welcomed these entities into their existing theology. Really, the myth of the extraterrestrial as savior has been incorporated by even in the most conservative of Christians, just on their own terms. Christianity’s undergirding myths are being reworked and replaced in order to survive the space age.

6. Conclusion

Technological advances, especially in the realm of astronomy, have opened new physical and intellectual domains. The universe seems to shrink each time another inch of the heavens is scrutinized, mapped, and documented. What was once a mysterious realm intelligible only to the gods has been condensed to a set of hard data and cold calculations. Ironically, this same capability has caused humans to realize the sheer size and complexity of the cosmos. No longer is the enormity of space a product of naïve suppositions, for now it is known without question what peoples of times past could only speculate: endless are the universe and its possibilities. But has the human race truly shrugged off the superstitious vestiges of its forebears? Rather than diminishing mankind’s reverential awe, scientific breakthroughs have generated new myths, befitting of a space-age society. Like the peoples of Isaiah’s day, humanity continues to gaze into the heavens in anticipation of “gods” on high, whose insights into the unknown and benevolence for humankind will save the human race from the ills of today.

Surely it is no accident that Isaiah directed the Israelites’ attention to the stars, the very objects they were worshipping. Yet it is more likely he was instructing them to look, not *to* the stars, but beyond them. For the prophet, the number, the order, the greatness, and the harmony of the heavenly bodies serve as reminders of the power and majesty of the true God, rather than the folly of idolatry. The modern-day lights in the sky are the exotic beings that occupy this starry void. While some followers of Christ believe the Bible is clear-cut on the issue of extraterrestrials, others are not so sure. The heavens all for us or for others to share in its splendor—neither would be detrimental to Christianity, and neither would be any less staggering or amazing or terrifying. And whether or not alien life forms populate the cosmos, they are populating modern imaginations. From TV shows and movies to books and video games, extraterrestrials are everywhere. Some worship these beings as saviors outright, while others do so unawares. Some witness their stealthy craft flittering across the firmament, while others experience more personal visitations. Entities from distant star systems are creeping not only into our bedrooms, but into our worldviews and theologies. Mainstream Christianity is no exception. Perhaps, then, it is only a matter of time before “sacred” spacemen “abduct” the Christian cosmos, or maybe they already have.

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