

Alien Worlds

Diane G Tumminia, ed

Alien Worlds: Social and Religious Dimensions of Extraterrestrial Contact

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Published on the sixtieth anniversary of two major “extraterrestrial encounters” - the Kenneth Arnold UFO sightings and the alleged UFO crash at Roswell, New Mexico - Diane Tumminia’s edited volume investigates a good portion of similar extraterrestrial phenomena that have developed in tandem with new religious movements, as well as the subsequent emergence of a culture of metaphysical eclecticism.

As popular culture continues to cross-breed with the malleable tenets of spiritual seekers, some religious expressions appear to be informed by a mosaic of extraterrestrial mythologies. Rather than capitulating to the flat disposition of secular disenchantment or the colourful topography of religious re-enchantment, this form of indoctrination on the part of extraterrestrial aficionados introduced a tertiary spiritual marketplace through what might be best described as info-enchantment. In today’s world of new religious movements, technological advancements have given way to a discerning enterprise of information gathering. This type of interaction with plentiful information is vested with the capability of transforming relatively grounded traditions of belief and practice and casting them far into the extraordinary heavens characterized by extraterrestrial contact and aerial anomalies.

This book cautiously tests the boundaries of “scientific discourse” and loosely contributes to the possibilities of alternative forms of reasoning. Perhaps since the so-called “Alan Sokal affair” in 1996 where the integrity of the publication process was tested, the social sciences in particular must be vigilant about the type of theory, method and now content they explore, as anything can be considered suspect. Yet if one thing is certain, this type of book is of timely importance with a great deal of attention given to such international concessions as the unveiling of an extensive UFO archive by the French Government in 2007 and a major disclosure of UFO files by the UK in 2008. The combination of this kind of transparency and the magnitude of information exchange via the internet are sure to make this book a popular addition to the extensive work on extraterrestrial contact.

Tumminia’s book brings together a diverse group of experts with training in a broad range of fields including Anthropology, Archaeology, Astronomy, Astrophysics, Computer Science, English, History, Religious Studies, and Sociology. *Alien Worlds* is comprised of an introduction and seventeen essays broken up into four parts. In addition, there are also eighteen different illustrations—including photographs and diagrams—as well as three tables that serve to draw a more clear picture of much of this nearly imperceptible phenomena. Finally, there are two appendices; one that annotates a number of “contactee religions” and another that

provides a detailed description of the various aliens that subjects and researchers have encountered.

Tumminia provides a tour of her book within a thoughtfully organized introduction. She encourages readers to go beyond this piece and seek out other information resources where an abundance of research exists. In this way Tumminia's introduction offers a framework for a book that can be considered a jumping-off point for further research. While she provides some conclusions, they are tentative and invite further investigation.

The first part of the book titled "Contactee Religions" is dedicated to "contactee religions" and a variety of angles from which this unique form of religious content can be interpreted. In his chapter entitled "Hagiography and Text in the Aetherius Society", Mikael Rothstein draws upon concept of hagiography with the Aetherius Society while demonstrating the effective techniques of socially constructing a religious leader. Through an examination of texts written about Aetherius Society founder George King, Rothstein shows how this type of biography-making preserves King's charisma as well as the legitimacy of his teachings for his followers.

In "The Odyssey of Sister Thedra" Jerome Clark tells the story of Mrs Dorothy Martin, one of the most well-known contactees within the social sciences. It was Martin—then known by the pseudonym of Mrs. Keech—that was the focus of the seminal study of failed prophecy by Leon Festinger and his team of social psychologists in the early 1950s. Clark details Martin's experience as a channelling figure for celestial beings, as well as her role as a prominent participant and leader of a variety of New Age, spiritual and contactee movements.

The following chapter is Diane Tumminia's account of the Universal Industrial Church of the New World Comforter (UICNWC). Despite the sparse academic research from social scientists on the UICNWC, Tumminia manages to write a rather detailed description of this group, including a brief story of founder Allen Michael's life, a short narrative about the movement and some of its followers, as well as the socialist leaning tenets described as "millenarian utopians" (p47).

The next chapter titled "Presumed Immanent" by Bryan Sentes and Susan Palmer is a postmodern interpretation of the International Raelian Movement (IRM). Palmer and Sentes explore the narrative of IRM founder Claude Vorilhon (popularly known as Raël) while examining their belief structure and behaviour through the lens of postmodernism. In this fragmented scene of popular culture, Sentes and Palmer provide one of the more convincing interpretations of the divide between religion and science.

In a complex, though cogent account of the Unarius Academy of Science, Tumminia contributes another chapter employing the methods of mundane reasoning. In this account, Tumminia attempts to locate both the Unarian's and her own interpretive logic for understanding what is truth and science. Using this type of reasoning, the

implausibility of extraordinary beliefs is well recognized by the in-group Unarians. Furthermore, they are quite aware of the fact that their ideas may be extraordinary, yet they confirm the validity of their claims by citing errors on the part of those that contradict their own.

The second part of *Alien Worlds*, entitled “Abductees and Contactees” provides a discussion surrounding the interpretive means, as well as the possibilities of research in this field. George Rønnevig’s chapter “Toward an Explanation of the Abduction Epidemic” explores the possibilities of attributing abduction memory to sleep states; extending the apparatus of his research to include alternative therapies and support groups that he contends may serve to reinforce the abduction narrative. In a similar, though much broader interpretation of these abduction narratives, Benson Saler’s chapter “Secondary Beliefs and the Alien Abduction Phenomenon” focuses on alien abduction as one of three case studies that demonstrate what he and his colleague Charles Ziegler view as a “multifaceted significance of belief.” In their research, “secondary beliefs” about alien abduction and its relationship to the credulity create an interactive component that serves to affirm beliefs in these narratives.

In “Alien Abduction Narratives and Religious Contexts”, Scott Scribner contributes a psychosocial analysis of alien abduction narratives (AAN), drawing on their similarities with religious text. Using a “narrative-phenomenological” method based upon a psychological model of fear, Scribner hypothesizes that the AAN phenomenon originates within human conditions.

In an inquiry about how one should study extraterrestrial encounters and aerial anomalies, Pierre Lagrange examines these topics through the lens of the sociology of knowledge. In his chapter “Close Encounters of the French Kind” Lagrange concludes that the irrationality of these phenomena rests outside the parameters of sociological research, conversely describing it as a “sociological untouchable” (p153).

In the third part of the book titled “Myth, Folklore, and Media” contributors grapple with further issues of appropriate methods for research, the categorization of phenomena through literature within the academe, and the dimensions of taking popular culture and supplanting it into the cultivation of a subculture. Similar to Lagrange’s chapter, Jacques Valle weighs in on the scientific objectivity discussion in his chapter “Consciousness, Culture, and UFOs.” In contrast with his time spent in discursive defence of the Extraterrestrial Hypothesis of the 1960s, Valle questions the scientific objectivity of conducting research within this area.

In “Aliens from the Cosmos” Anna E. Kubiak provides a literature review that demonstrates just how wide the spectrum of UFO lore extends. Kubiak’s piece dovetails nicely into the next chapter entitled “All I Ever Want to Be, I Learned from Playing Klingon” where Jennifer Porter draws connections between popular culture and the dramaturgical enactment of the fandom-based “Klingon Religion.” Porter’s

piece is rich in detail and brings the reader back into an applied context where human activity is informed through an infatuation with popular culture.

The next and final part of the book titled “Ufological Science and Therapy” explores the connections between the traditions of science and contactee religions. Though these two traditions appear to be opposites, the authors of this section emphasize the strategy of contactee religions and their supporters to incorporate scientific discourses that serve to provide legitimacy for their respective religious beliefs and practices.

In the only intentionally subjective contribution, James F Strange offers a different look at extraterrestrial encounters in his chapter “Observations from Archaeology and Religious Studies on First Contact and ET Evidence.” Strange hones in on the possibilities of scientific discoveries within the realm of extraterrestrial evidence by posing a series of hypothetical scenarios that would stand to change the trajectory of science and history as they are known today. The chapter is telling in terms of the way accepted science often meets such claims with dubious scrutiny.

In the next two chapters Anne Cross and Pia Anderson put together two insightful chapters about the appropriation of science for the use of legitimizing religious doctrine. Reminiscent of her previous sociological work on UFOlogy, Cross’s chapter “A Confederacy of Fact and Faith” reports on her observations pertaining to the intricacies found within the strategy of “scientizing” religion. Similarly, Andersson’s piece entitled “Ancient Alien Bothers, Ancient Terrestrial Remains: Archeology or Religion?” re-examines some of the Ancient Astronaut thesis in the search for common ground between science and religion. In a pragmatic fashion, Andersson concludes that

...regardless of which methodology ultimately proves its position regarding prehistory, populist theories about our beginning and our evolution still may turn out to be determined by rhetoric, marketing skills, and media exposure rather than by the solid scientific research that rigorous academics advocate. (p274)

Christopher Helland’s chapter “The Raëlian Creation Myth and the Art of Cloning” deals with the way in which the combination of science and religion of alien worlds spills over into practice. Helland revisits the Raëlian’s attempt at experimenting with applied science that began with the winter 2002 announcement that they had successfully cloned a human-being—one of the more incredible claims ever touted by a new religious movement. Helland comments that the Raëlian’s use of cloning is a “rhetorical tool” (p290) serving to support and affirm their extraordinary narratives.

In the final chapter titled “Abductee Support Groups: Who Are the Members?” Christopher Bader presents a minor goldmine of information about the social characteristics of abductee support groups. Using the data from a survey of the UFO Contact Center International (UFOCCI), Bader captured some incisive information

about abductees including their “gender, age, marital status and history, occupation, income, number of children and religious background” (p298). Bader worked with sample of 55 respondents to present a clearer picture of the people that experience extraterrestrial contact.

Overall, this compilation is an essential addition to the often marginalized body of critical extraterrestrial studies. Tumminia and her contributors demonstrate a great deal of cultural competency and sensitivity toward this often misunderstood field. In addition, the sheer breadth and scope of *Alien Worlds* is an impressive accomplishment in the face of such daunting research obstacles. Interdisciplinary religious scholars including sociologists, anthropologists, and perhaps even psychologists would find this book useful in both their research as well as the classroom.

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