MAHATMAS IN SPACE:
THE UFOLOGICAL TURN AND MYTHOLOGICAL MATERIALITY
OF POST-WORLD WAR II THEOSOPHY

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Introduction

It is commonplace to designate a certain group of 20th century religions “UFO cults” or “UFO religions.” Members of such movements entertain a common belief in extraterrestrial visitation, and in keeping with a cosmo-theological persuasion hold the visitors to be divine beings or superhuman agents of some other kind. Despite the fact that UFO religions share basic mythological and theological structures they are quite diverse in other respects, and it is necessary to distinguish between various types in order to understand the phenomenon (Rothstein 2000: 11–12). One particular type of UFO religions has a clear Theosophical inclination, but perhaps it is wrong to classify religions of this category primarily as UFO religions. It would be equally reasonable to see them as rather recent Theosophical off-shoots with the “flying saucer” as a predominant mythological component. If so a number of “UFO religions” are first and foremost expressions of Theosophical imagination and social entrepreneurship.

The Theosophical current is arguably the most fertile innovation in Euro-American religious history since the inception of Protestantism. The Theosophical Society, the initial institutionalized propagator of the new belief system (established in 1875), soon reached its organizational peak and established itself in a stable niche with few prospects for further expansion, despite the Society’s grandiose self-perception. Theosophy as a mythological and theological system more generally, however, was from early on divided into various branches and movements, and it entered numerous socio-cultural contexts, very often in informal ways. The rise of UFO mythology in the late 1940s marks a parallel development, and the potent interface between the two should come as no surprise. Theosophical speculations emerged partly as a religious reflection inspired by modernity, and the notion of “flying saucers,” extraterrestrial visitation, and so forth, would follow as a later phase in the development of modern, non-institutionalized, mythological worldviews, and theologies. Challenging
prevailing beliefs, and mixing otherwise incompatible meaning systems, Theosophy and ufology alike have provided a twentieth- and twenty-first-century audience with astonishing stories, and in conjunction they supported an entirely new strand in Euro-American esoteric teachings: the UFO contactee movement which shall occupy us in the following pages. More specifically this chapter will discuss how a *mythological materiality*, i.e. religious notions based on imagined objects believed to exist in the real world, supports a wider religious worldview, which in turn is a reconfiguration of prevailing Theosophical beliefs: enter the myth of the flying saucer and the slightly transmuted Theosophical Mahatmas believed to pilot them. In essence, a case of mythological modernization or updating, and, in the context of the present volume, an example of Theosophical adaptability.

Studies of the Theosophically-based flying saucer groups will not be a novelty to the interested reader. Much has been written and the field seems to be growing, but nothing new in terms of movement ethnographies shall be added here. Rather the intention is to discuss one particular phenomenon: Why did the religious imaginations of a number of Theosophically-interested entrepreneurs take a ufological turn in the 1950s, and on what basis did this innovation take place? In doing so I shall also consider the preconditions for this development embedded in classical Theosophy, but first a brief glance back into the times of what I have dubbed the “ufological turn.”

*Changing Times*

It appears that the Theosophical generation that arose in the wake of World War II did not restrict its ambitions to Earth. During the 1950s Theosophically-inclined flying saucer enthusiasts revivified the Mahatmas of classical Theosophy by reinventing them as benevolent “Space Brothers” arriving on Earth in physical vehicles in order to teach and protect the self-destructive children of the planet. The notion that the Mahatmas originated from somewhere special, or belonged to a place out of reach, was in accordance with classical Theosophical ideas, but distant planets provided a new and fresh realm for Theosophical imaginations, and

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1 A number of monographs and edited volumes on UFO religions have been published and more will come. In these and other volumes in-depth studies of various UFO religions will be found. In this article I refer to some of these: See Partridge (ed.) 2003; Tumminia 2007; Lewis 1995, 2000, 2003; Rønnevig 2004; Palmer 2004; Rothstein 2000b.