CHAPTER 20

The Occultist and the Spaceman
The Metamorphosis of Dorothy Martin

Michael Barkun

Most social scientists know very little about occultists, but there is one occultist they are likely to know something about: Marion Keech. Marion Keech was not her real name. Rather, it was the pseudonym given to her by researchers from the University of Minnesota who made her the centerpiece of a book that quickly became a classic of social science literature, When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group that Predicted the Destruction of the World (Festinger et al. 1964 [1956]). When Prophecy Fails achieved its status because it described and vividly demonstrated a concept of broad utility, namely, cognitive dissonance, the situation that “arises when the beliefs, values, or opinions individuals hold (that is, their cognitions) come into conflict with reality” (Stone 2000: 3–4). As the subtitle suggests, the research examined a situation in which belief in world destruction collided with the reality that the world continued stubbornly on its way.

‘Marion Keech’ was in fact a middle-aged Oak Park, Illinois, housewife-turned-medium named Dorothy Martin. The episode chronicled by the Minnesota scholars occurred in 1954, yet Martin’s occult career continued for another thirty-eight years, most of it through another persona, that of ‘Sister Thedra’, during which time she intersected with a strange assortment of figures in the occult milieu. It is that subsequent career that will be examined here, but in order for it to be understood, the first phase of her life needs to be described, for it provides the essential context.

Who Was Dorothy Martin?

Dorothy Martin’s early life (Clark 2007) prior to the episode that brought her notoriety is obscure. She appears to have been born in West Virginia in 1900. Suggestions on the Internet that she was born on Mount Shasta (“ Providentia” 2008), a locale dear to mystics and occultists, seems to have been driven largely by a desire to embellish her pedigree. Martin lived in New York City in the late 1930s, and it was there that she became acquainted with occultism through Theosophy, but over the next fifteen years or so she appears to have read widely in and was perhaps affiliated with a variety of other movements.
These included the ‘I AM’ Activity and later Dianetics, the precursor to Scientology. By at least the early 1950s, she had moved to the Chicago suburbs. She was married (when is not clear) and little is known of her husband, beyond the fact that he did not share her occult interest, but neither did he stand in the way of her enthusiasm for it.

In considering what took place in 1954, it is important to bear in mind that ‘flying saucers’ emerged in American media and popular culture in 1947. By the early 1950s, a group of individuals had appeared who claimed to have either received messages from the saucers or met their crews. These ‘contactees’ need to be distinguished from the later and better known population of ‘abductees’, who claimed to have been taken into UFOs against their will. Some of the contactees said that they had received radio or Morse code messages from the ships, but most claimed to have received them through some psychic means. In that sense, the paranormal communication utilised by contactees almost exactly paralleled, or may be seen as an extension of, mediumistic activities long practiced among occultists (Melton and Eberhart 1995).

Saturated as Dorothy Martin was in occult ideas, she began in the early 1950s to experiment with automatic writing. This initially produced messages from her dead father, but by 1954, she was getting communications from extraterrestrial figures called Guardians, who resembled the Ascended Masters of Theosophy. Since by then Mrs Martin had joined a local occult group, these messages began to find an audience. Through intermediaries, news of the messages reached Dr and Mrs Charles Laughead of East Lansing, Michigan. The Laugheads, who were embedded in both occult and contact circles, quickly contacted her.

Meanwhile, the messages Mrs Martin was receiving became increasingly apocalyptic. They prophesied massive, cataclysmic events that would alter the very geography of the earth, cause immense human suffering, and bring nations to their knees. The shape of whole continents would be changed. To the extent that one could make sense of the Delphic pronouncements, they foretold that the waters of the Great Lakes would empty, drowning Chicago, among other disasters. A great new mountain range would appear in the center of the country. The Egyptian desert would flower. Western and Central Europe would sink under water. The legendary sunken island of Lemuria (Mu) in the Pacific would rise. The only safe places in the United States would be the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains, the Catskills, and the Alleghenies.

Martin had very likely gotten the idea for such calamities from the American psychic, Edgar Cayce, who had died in 1945. Cayce had predicted a somewhat different but equally daunting set of “earth changes,” as he called them, during trance states over several decades. However, the disasters that Cayce foresaw