APOLCALYPSIS IN EARLY UFO AND ALIEN-BASED RELIGIONS

CHRISTIAN AND THEOSOPHICAL THEMES

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Introduction

UFO and alien-based religions crystallised as contemporary Western spiritual phenomena in the post-World-War-II era, and reflected both historico-political and moral anxieties about the atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, and the atmosphere of paranoia and expectation of the “end of the world” that emerged as a result of the arms race between the United States of America and the Soviet Union. The theology of such religions drew upon two principal sources, one physical and the other spiritual. First, the hardware-oriented, proto-conspiracist sightings of “flying saucers” by Kenneth Arnold in 1947 and the Roswell Incident the same year, in which an unidentified object crashed in Roswell, New Mexico, and the United States Air Force cleared the site of debris, seemed to provide evidence that UFOs and the extra-terrestrials who travelled in them were real. Second, the Theosophical idea of Ascended Masters who could transmit occult knowledge to humanity by means of clairaudient mediums or “channelling” was extended to include aliens from distant planets (in addition to Tibetan lamas, denizens of lost worlds like Atlantis and Mu, the dead, and other putative sources of wisdom).

This potent mixture was married to the popular cultural narratives of science fiction, such as the influential “alien messiah” film The Day the Earth Stood Still (1951). The themes of apocalypse and conspiracy were particularly congruent with the Cold-War atmosphere of paranoia and scapegoating; thus the notion that the appearance of UFOs and the visitations by extra-terrestrials

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were signs that—unless peace on earth be achieved—the end times were at hand gained currency. The enlightened ones would be taken into the ships before the destruction of the world.\(^5\) UFO and alien-based religions developed in divergent directions; while some advocated an eschaton of battle and destruction (e.g., the Church Universal and Triumphant), others envisaged a harmonious Intergalactic Parliament in which humans participated in peace (e.g., the Aetherius Society). This chapter examines the apocalyptic expectations of several UFO and alien-based religions, and identifies both their sources in the religious currents of the early twentieth century, and their imbrication with post-War political discourses.

**Modernity, Science and Religion**

UFO and alien-based religions emerged in the wake of World War II and drew on alternative spiritual currents including Theosophy and esoteric Christianity and the anti-Communist and militaristic rhetoric of the democratic West, particularly America. These “spiritual” and “material” sources employed radically different notions of modernity, particularly in terms of the relationship between science and religion. Theosophy, founded by Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) and American Civil War veteran Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) in New York in 1875 manifested particular nineteenth-century interests, chief among which were the unification of “Western” and “Eastern” religions and erasure of the divide between science and religion.\(^6\) These two aims were related, in that Blavatsky claimed that the traditional religion of the West, Christianity, was incompatible with the new science of evolution, whereas the religions of the East, Hinduism and Buddhism, were not. Mark Bevir has stated that “Blavatsky...outlined an occult cosmology which embraced both a geological time scale and an evolutionary view of development” and that she “denied that occult science transgressed the law of nature.”\(^7\) Theosophy embraced the quest for a “key to all mythologies,” advocated gender and racial equality, explored esoteric themes including the paranormal and lost civilisations like Atlantis, and forecast the imminent arrival of the “World Teacher” (known variously as Maitreya—from the Buddhist tradition—or the

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