



ARTICLE:

Outer Space and Inner Soul

By Ted Peters

(2200 words)

Outer space has been lodged in my soul since my youth. This led me to write the first edition of *UFOs--God's Chariots?* in 1977. In more recent years, I've invested considerable academic energy in the dialogue between science and religion with a special focus on astrobiology and the search for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI). One thing I learned is that SETI scientists and UFO researchers do not attend the same barbeques. Rather, they sneer at each other in each other's absence. Each accuses the other of not being scientific enough. I find this curious, but not boring. So, after writing a few treatises on *astrotheology* and *astroethics*, I'm returning once again to the UFO question with a focus on the extraterrestrial hypothesis.

As I return to prepare the second edition, I find today's media right where they were a half century ago. Unfortunately, the media still thinks that the entire UFO pie can be divided into two slices, people who believe in UFOs and skeptics who do not believe. In order to obtain balance, reporters interview one unbeliever for each believer. Then, they consider their work done. In my judgment, this is too simplistic. When asked by a reporter if I believe in UFOs, I routinely answer: "No. I believe in God. I study UFOs."

The UFO phenomenon is much too textured and complex and nuanced to reduce it to believers vs. unbelievers. When I wrote the first edition of *UFOs--God's Chariots?* I tried to show how this is the case. Now as I turn to the revision, it appears that the phenomenon is even more complex than it was three decades ago.

This 2nd edition of *UFOs--God's Chariots?* does two things. First, it offers something toward understanding one of the most intriguing and fascinating mysteries of our post World War II era, namely, the mystery of unidentified flying objects. Despite decades of study, the UFO phenomenon just seems to increase in its mystery. Like trying to catch a greased pig, once we think we have a firm grasp of it, it squirms out in another direction so that we have to resume the chase. It is one thing to see a daylight disc or a glowing object in the night sky, or even to track an unknown blip on radar. It is another thing to have unknowns follow our aircraft or even land while leaving rings of scorched grass on the

ground. It is still another to speak with people who claim that they were abducted by diminutive gray skinned entities and taken aboard a flying saucer or, in some cases, even give birth to hybrid babies that combine heavenly with earthly DNA. What is communicated to abductees and especially to contactees is of special interest to me as a scholar: ufonauts speak of their world among the stars as enjoying a level of peace and love which we on Earth can only envy. When we add up these elements and find an incongruous combination of physical nuts-and-bolts aircraft merged with paranormal experiences such as telepathy and walking through walls, this suggests we have a mysterious phenomenon *extraordinaire*.

The resolution to the mystery in its entirety is well beyond the scope of this article or even the book and, as far as I know, beyond the scope of any scholar working on the problem today. There is a particular contribution I can make, however, which will help to fill out our understanding of at least one important dimension of the UFO phenomenon. This is the religious dimension, the spiritual dimension.

The religious or spiritual qualities of this mystery descending from the sky have, for the most part, been overlooked by UFO researchers during the last sixty years. When the topic of religion has been raised, it has been treated with astonishing naiveté, a naiveté that could be founded only on ignorance, or worse, prejudice against religion. The penchant has been to interpret UFOs from only one perspective, namely, as physical objects whose nature can be discerned through scientific analysis. A form of tunnel vision has been at work. I would like to expand this field of vision. In doing so, I do not wish to add psychic or spiritual facets to an otherwise physical phenomenon; rather, I wish to point out what has been present all along. The religious dimension has been a part of the UFO experience right from the beginning. It will be my task in this book to bring the tools of a scholar of religion and a theologian to bear so that we can see that this is the case.

Spiritual Dimensions within Science

This brings us to the second task the present book performs. This second task is more indirect than direct. In order to get to the religious or spiritual domain of the UFO experience, we will have to pass through the land of the scientists. We will have to show the limits of the scientific perspective if we are to be able to open the door toward the religious perspective. This will be difficult to do, because the scientific mindset is not the private property of our practicing scientists alone. We all think this way. The scientific way of thinking imbues our culture. It provides us with the horizon and the logic whereby we admit something to our understanding and count it as knowledge. Thus, we will have to go to some lengths to show just how religious or spiritual sensibilities come to symbolic expression in UFO reports. Once this has been accomplished, then we will be ready to make some theological judgments. We will also be ready to offer some advice regarding how UFOs should be understood from the perspective of faith in God. In short, this book is not only

about UFOs which descend from the sky. It is about the culture that exists here on Earth. It is a case study of the relationship between science and religion.

In my maturing judgment, I believe the central thesis of the first edition of *UFOs--God's Chariots?* remains sound, namely, the UFO phenomenon exposes a widespread cultural tendency to translate traditional religious or spiritual sensibilities into scientific or materialist language and categories. In short, today's flying saucers replace yesterday's angels. So, this central theme continues to serve as the backbone connecting all the ribs in the second edition. A few new ribs will be added, however.

Abductions

One new rib has to do with changes taking place in abduction accounts. The early abduction accounts in the 1960s and 1970s tended to look like secularized versions of religious experience. Abductees, though frightened, roundly considered their experience to be positive, even life changing. During the late 1980s, however, many abduction reports turned dark, menacing. Abducted women and men claimed to have been abused, even raped by spacelings. Stories of pregnancies and births of hybrid babies were retrieved through hypnotic regression. At first this new dimension to the UFO phenomenon seemed to contradict my thesis regarding ufonauts as celestial saviors. I resolved to look into this matter, to see whether confirmation or disconfirmation of my original thesis might be the implication. I'll share my musings.

Will Contact with ETI Cause a Religious Crisis?

A second new rib is a report on some empirical research of my own, the *Peters ETI Religious Crisis Survey*. I asked people who self-identify as religious or non-religious to answer questions regarding the potential impact of confirmed contact with ETI. I wanted to test the widespread assumption that contact with ETI would precipitate a crisis for religious people, perhaps even destroying traditional religion. I'll share my data and my conclusions.

I'm well aware that the extraterrestrial hypothesis is not the only hypothesis for explaining the UFO phenomenon. Yet, it is the one that interests me here. As I see it, space consciousness is built right into the phenomenon. A phenomenon includes both the object and the subject, both unidentified object and the subject's attempt to interpret it. The extraterrestrial interpretation is virtually co-present to any facts or data having to do with flying saucers. The meaning of the UFO is as important to me as any facts associated with the UFO. To a certain degree, *UFOs--God's Chariots?* is a study of human meaning in light of a scientized worldview.

New UFO Theologies are Developing

On the one hand, religious sensibilities surface in UFO lore in disguised form, in the form of a secularized religion. On the other hand, actual UFO theologies are appearing in an almost undisguised form. UFO generated theologies come in two varieties: ancient alien theology and contactee theology. I stress: these are secular theologies. They belong to no church. UFO theologies appeal to those who are Spiritual But Not Religious, the SBNRs. Curiously, UFO theology may not even look like traditional theology. It looks more like science. But, what appears to be UFO science has become a vehicle for expressing displaced religious or spiritual hopes.

Our *Ancient Astronaut Theorists* offer reinterpretations of ancient phenomena. They reinterpret the texts of the Bible and other sacred literature. They look again at ancient marvels such as the pyramids, statuary, and petroglyphs. They hypothesize that human contact with visitors from space better account for what happened than claims about gods. Rather than supernatural intervention, our ancestors allegedly experienced super-technological intervention. Extraterrestrial geneticists allegedly jump-started human evolution and initiated progress in terrestrial science and technology. What we have at work here in ancient astronaut theory is a theology without the divine, a secular theology that accounts for both creation and providence.

Contactee theology does not represent a rival sect; rather, it offers a complementary set of doctrines. Like ancient astronaut theory, the contactees believe in evolution and rely upon an apparently scientific assumption: if extraterrestrials are older than earthlings and have evolved longer, then they are more advanced than we in science, technology, medicine, politics, morality, and even religion. Where ETI are now is where we will be in the future, where we will be if we progress in our evolution. Visitors from space represent our own future, arriving ahead of time. This implies that visiting ufonauts have the technical capacity for solving difficult problems on our planet. The two most difficult of these problems are the threat of nuclear war and the threat of ecological catastrophe. Our more advanced space benefactors offer us world peace and environmental rescue. In short, contactee theology projects salvation coming from the skies in the form of technologically advanced UFOs.

I ask: why are some people expressing such an interest in the connection of religious doctrines with UFOs? I suggest that the study of UFOs has the appearance of being scientific--hence, it offers the opportunity to discuss religious feelings in seemingly scientific terms. Whether we say it in public or not, many of us believe science is good and religion is bad. Science is for modern educated people; religion is for old-fashioned superstitious people. We feel a little embarrassed when we have a religious feeling, as if we were being subverted from within by a pre-civilized emotion. If only we could feel that our religious beliefs had the respectability and credibility of science! Then we could have confidence in

what we believe. I suggest that the ancient astronaut theory and contactee theologies offer us an ostensibly respectable way of talking about our deeper spiritual needs. Our religious feelings urge us to ponder the ultimate heights and depths of our spiritual reality. If we are compelled to translate our spiritual concerns into naturalistic or scientific terms, then we need nothing short of the infinity of the stars to capture our speculations. A UFO theology can do this for us.

But, I ask: are UFO theologies healthy? Or, do they risk drawing us into idolatry? The potential idol here is technological progress. Whether advances in science or technology take place on Earth or on another planet, to trust in technology for human salvation is to build one's house on sand. No amount of evolutionary advance or technological progress can save the human race from our own propensity for self-destructive behavior. If anything, progress in technology becomes progress in the scope of our destructive potential. Our salvation is to be found only in a God of grace. To place our trust for planetary deliverance in advanced technology--whether terrestrial or extraterrestrial technology--is to trust a deity that cannot deliver.

Despite my prophetic warning, I must admit that UFOs have a powerful way of drawing out our spiritual sensibilities in masked form, even when we believe ourselves to be no longer religious. Each one of us has a deep spiritual need to be at one with our creator and source of life. Thoughts about planetary self-destruction and death create anxiety. When destruction and death seem inevitable, we begin to ask for God's hand to save us. If we are convinced we are not religious, we may ask the government, the good luck charm, our crystal, the astrologer, or even UFOs to save us.

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