

## Will ETI Contact Put an End to our World's Religions? by Ted Peters

**Abstract:** What will happen to Earth's religions once we've made contact with an extraterrestrial civilization? Will confirmation of ETI cause terrestrial religion to collapse? "No" is the answer based upon a summary of the "Peters ETI Religious Crisis Survey." "No" is also the prevailing--though not the only--answer we get from theologians, who for the most part welcome their space neighbors. Religious believers are much more ready to share a pew with an alien than we might expect. In addition to institutionalized religions, this paper will also look at the religious dimension to culture, especially at the *ETI Myth*, shared by SETI astrobiologists, UFO researchers, and the wider culture. The ETI Myth along with the UFO Myth speculate that evolutionary progress has led extraterrestrial civilizations to higher intelligence, better science, and more advanced spirituality and morality. This means ET could redeem Earth from its penchant for warfare and self-destruction. This belief is a myth whether it is held by scientists or religious believers or both.

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"If any UFOs were discovered to be ETs it would be one of the most important events in human history."<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this line by two political theorists speaks for our entire culture. But, we might ask much more specifically: just how momentous would such an event be for religion? If we are given conclusive evidence that we share our universe with intelligent extraterrestrial creatures, what can we predict will happen to our terrestrial belief systems? If we would make contact with ETI, would this so shock existing religious doctrines that the world's traditional religions would collapse?

Much of what passes for conventional wisdom suggests that terrestrial religion is fragile and would collapse under the weight of confirmed knowledge of extraterrestrial races. We need to ask: because our religious traditions formulated their key beliefs within

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Wendt and Raymond Duvall, "Sovereignty and the UFO," *Political Theory* 36:4:607-633 (August 2008) 611.

an ancient worldview now out of date, would dramatic new knowledge dislodge our pre-modern dogmas? Are religious believers Earth-centric, so that contact with ETI would de-center and marginalize our sense of self-importance? Do our traditional religions rank us human beings on top of life's hierarchy, so that meeting ETI smarter than us means we would lose our superior rank? If we are created in God's image, as the biblical traditions teach, will we have to share that divine image with our new neighbors? In short, would confirmation of the existence of ETI cause terrestrial belief systems to collapse?

My answer to this array of questions is negative. No, traditional religious belief systems will not undergo radical change let alone collapse in the face of new knowledge of ETI. Perhaps I should qualify this slightly by saying that, to date, we do not have any evidence that confirmation of the existence of ETI would precipitate a radical change. Why? On what grounds do I make this claim? In what follows I intend to support this claim by appeal to (1) the findings of the *Peters ETI Religious Crisis Survey*; (2) the voiced positions of theologians; and (3) the development of the ETI Myth which is shared by the UFO community, the community of space researchers including astrobiologists, and the wider western culture. By the term *ETI Myth* I refer to a scientized religious belief that terrestrial salvation will come in the future from a race of more highly evolved extraterrestrial creatures for whom science has become the solution to all creaturely problems. Belief in the ETI Myth constitutes a secular form of religion that operates outside of institutional religion, even though it occasionally overlaps with existing beliefs. As such, it already suggests that any shock precipitated by ETI contact is behind us; and Earth's welcome mat is open.

The domains within which I would like to work include the UFO community, the scientific community including SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence Institute), and the wider culture. My guiding question is formulated in the future tense—that is, what might happen in the future? I recognize that this elicits impatience on the part of many in the UFO community who are persuaded that we on Earth have already been contacted by new friends in outer space. Stanton Friedman, among others, already lives in a post-contact world. He's upset with establishment scientists because they rely upon SETI rather than UFO reports for their information regarding alien contact. "Earthlings will first will find out flying saucer reality from ufology...rather than through efforts of SETI..."<sup>2</sup> Despite such impatience with treating Ufology and SETI together, my approach here will be to formulate the problem with ETI contact as a hypothesis.

### **Why do we want to ask this question?**

Why would we speculate about the likelihood of a religious collapse in the face of new knowledge of ETI? Because a substantial number of people seem to believe this is the case. When they advance their prophecies, they typically appeal to one of two arguments: the de-centering argument and the higher evolution argument. Let us look at these in turn.

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<sup>2</sup> Stanton Friedman, "Learning from outer space: We need to examine assumptions about how things work," *MUFON UFO Journal*, No. 514 (February 2011) 10.

According to the *de-centering argument*, Earth's religions are Earthbound and unable to incorporate into their worldview the large scope of outer space and its numerous inhabitants. For Jews and Christians who are heirs of biblical religion, they are pre-Copernican. Christians, allegedly, believe they are at the center of creation; therefore, allegedly, Christians must deny the existence of ETI. So, if we were to find that ETI exist, Christian dogma would be falsified. Worse, the human race would be knocked out of its center just as the sun was knocked out of its center by Copernicus. In this argument the idea of the center is figurative, not literal. Earth's *homo sapiens* are allegedly the center of God's creation because of our special relationship with God. This special relationship is tied up to the image of God in us, the *imago Dei*. We on earth believe we are created in God's image (Genesis 1:26-29). So finding other intelligent beings—perhaps also created in the divine image--would marginalize us. To become marginalized by discovery of ETI would falsify our inherited dogma and bury biblical religion. So the de-centering argument alleges.

Yet, we might ask: does this criticism commit the straw man fallacy? Does the Christian religion actually teach that earth's humans are in the center? No, retorts David Wilkinson: the Christian religion has never placed the human race in the center. "God is the centre of all things and we are creatures given status by his love...[de-centering] is not a problem for biblical Christianity."<sup>3</sup> So our question is this: does the de-centering argument hold?

A second reason for belief in the demise of terrestrial religion is found in the *higher evolution argument*. Physicist, cosmologist, and astrobiologist Paul Davies at Arizona State University, for example, projects that advanced extraterrestrial civilizations will have evolved up and out of their respective religious histories into the stage of post-religious science. ETI will be too smart to believe the anachronistic things earthlings believe. If ETI were to visit us, their superior supra-religious beliefs would squash our more primitive biblical beliefs. "It might be the case that aliens had discarded theology and religious practice long ago as primitive superstition and would rapidly convince us to do the same. Alternatively, if they retained a spiritual aspect to their existence, we would have to concede that it was likely to have developed to a degree far ahead of our own. If they practiced anything remotely like a religion, we should surely soon wish to abandon our own and be converted to theirs."<sup>4</sup> Even with the possibility of extraterrestrial decimation of terrestrial religion, Davies also recognizes the possibility that creative theology might be able to adapt. "The discovery of extraterrestrial life would not have to be theologically devastating."<sup>5</sup>

Jill Tarter, the director of the Center for SETI Research in Mountain View, California, similarly predicts confirmation of ETI would be devastating to terrestrial

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<sup>3</sup> David Wilkinson, *Alone in the Universe?* (Crowborough UK: Monarch, 1997) 124. Wilkinson reiterates the logic of the de-centering argument, page 19.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Davies, *Are We Alone?* (London: Penguin, 1995) 37.

<sup>5</sup> Davies, "E.T. and God," *The Atlantic Monthly* (September 2003) 118; <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2003/davies.htm> .

theology. The god of terrestrial religion is our own invention, Tarter contends. It is possible to evolve and grow and get beyond our inherited belief in God. Although to date no contact of any sort with extraterrestrial intelligent life has occurred, Tarter can imagine myriads of planets teeming with living beings. All will have evolved. And, if some got a start earlier than we on earth, they will have evolved further. Their technology will have progressed; and they may even have a technology sufficiently advanced to communicate with us. Further, she imagines that these extraterrestrial societies will have achieved a high degree of social harmony so as to support this advanced technology. And, still further, if they have developed their own religion, it too will be more advanced than the religions we have on earth. Or, more likely, the “long-lived extraterrestrials either never had, or have outgrown, organized religion.”<sup>6</sup> We can forecast, then, that contact between earth and ETI will necessitate either the end of our inherited religious traditions or a new incorporation of a more universal worldview.

In summary, respected and influential voices can be heard prophesying extraterrestrial judgment against terrestrial religion. Just as the prophets of ancient Israel were put to the test, we will now put these prophecies to the test. We will see shortly that there is no empirical warrant for making such predictions.

### **What evidence do surveys provide?**

Do we have any empirical evidence that speaks to our question? Yes. We have evidence in the form of surveys in which religious believers are asked about their anxieties in the face of the prospect of ETI contact.

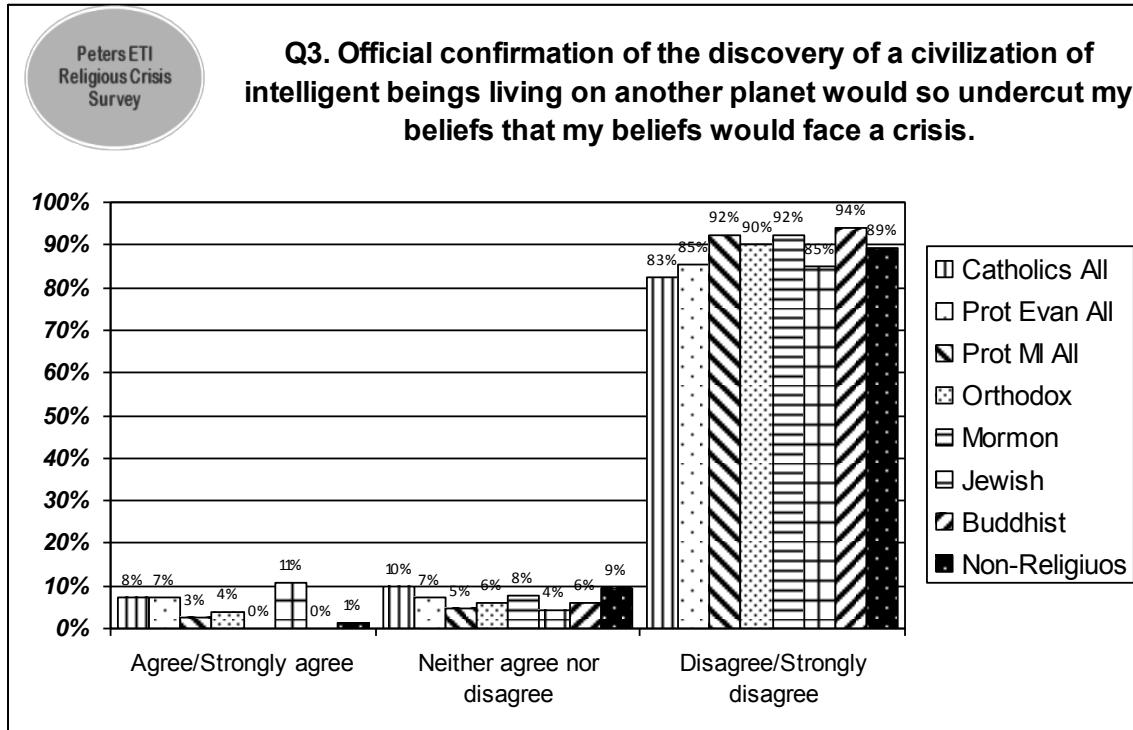
A few years ago, Victoria Alexander conducted a survey of U.S. clergy regarding their religious responses to extraterrestrial life. She provided clergy from Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish congregations with a set of questions such as, would you agree that “official confirmation of the discovery of an advanced, technologically superior extraterrestrial civilization would have severe negative effects on the country’s moral, social, and religious foundations”? She tabulated her data and concluded: “In sharp contrast to the ‘conventional wisdom’ that religion would collapse, ministers surveyed do not feel their faith and the faith of their congregation would be threatened.”<sup>7</sup> This result fascinated me. I decided to see if I could confirm or disconfirm Alexander’s conclusion.

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<sup>6</sup> Jill Cornell Tarter, “SETI and the Religions of the Universe,” in *Many Worlds: The New Universe, Extraterrestrial Life and the Theological Implications*, edited by Steven Dick (Philadelphia and London: Templeton Foundation Press, 2000) 45. 146. Davies and Tarter fall short of total agreement. Davies says, “Tarter’s dismissal is rather naïve... Though many religious movements have come and gone throughout history, some sort of spirituality seems to be part of human nature.” “E.T. and God,” 118.

<sup>7</sup> Victoria Alexander, “Extraterrestrial Life and Religion,” in *UFO Religions*, edited by James R. Lewis (Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 2003) 360. The survey conducted by D.A. Vakoich and Y.S. Lee, “Reactions to Receipt of a Message from Extraterrestrial Intelligence: A Cross-Cultural Empirical Study,” *Acta Astronomica* 46:10-12 (2000) 737-744, is partially relevant, because it suggests that Fundamentalist Christians might confront at crisis at confirmation of ETI. The Alexander survey does not cull out Fundamentalists; and the Peters survey below incorporates fundamentalists into the more comprehensive category of Evangelical Protestants.

With the indispensable help of my Berkeley research assistant Julie Froehlig, I conducted a similar survey that dealt with this issue in more detail. The “Peters ETI Religious Crisis Survey” of 2008 drew upon 1325 respondents. We asked clergy, lay, and religious (monks, nuns, etc.), whether, in the event of confirmation of ETI, a respondent’s own personal beliefs might confront a crisis; the beliefs of his or her tradition; the beliefs of other religious traditions; and numerous additional questions. No evidence of a widespread sense of threat to religion in any of these categories appeared. To the contrary, confidence that the new knowledge of ETI would be incorporated into systems of religious belief was predominant.<sup>8</sup>



What Question 3 tells us here is very relevant to our central question. It tells us that among Roman Catholics, Mainline Protestants, Evangelical Protestants, Orthodox Christians, Mormons, Jews, and Buddhists in our study the vast majority expect no crisis to develop when learning of ETI. Note further that this refers to their own personal religious belief, which may be distinguishable from the beliefs of the religious tradition with which they self-identify. What is significant, we believe, is this: if adherents to the world’s religious traditions foresee no threat to their personal beliefs, then the burden of proof that such a threat exists lies on the shoulders of the critics.

In addition to structured questions, the survey provided opportunity for respondents to offer comments. Although the comments varied, one consistency stands out, namely, regardless of religious affiliation, the de-centering argument is refuted.

<sup>8</sup> The summary report and all raw data for the *Peters ETI Religious Crisis Survey* of 2008 can be accessed at the following web site: <http://www.counterbalance.org.etsurvey.html>.

Again and again respondents affirmed the possibility and even likelihood of life on other planets. One Muslim commented: “Islamically, we do believe that God created other planets similar to Earth.” Another Muslim put it even more strongly, “Only arrogance and pride would make one think that Allah made this vast universe only for us to observe.”

Refutation of the de-centering argument could be found among Christians and Buddhists as well as Muslims. According to an individual self-identified as a mainline Protestant, “it’s pretty easy to deduce that God could create life on other planets.” An Orthodox Christian adds the situation up this way: “Because of the sheer numbers of suns with planets involved, I’ve always assumed that there is intelligent life elsewhere in the universe.” A Roman Catholic commented: “The world is too vast and wonderful and God’s power is so limitless, that there must be more than little old us.” Note how a Buddhist makes exactly the same point: “Our universe is huge. So astonishingly huge that I find it absurd to think we are alone in this universe as a sentient life form.” Another Buddhist reiterates this forcefully: “To think that in the infinity of the universe that we are the only intelligent life form in existence is ludicrous. I would only hope those beings would exhibit more wisdom than humans have in how they relate to their world and fellow beings.”

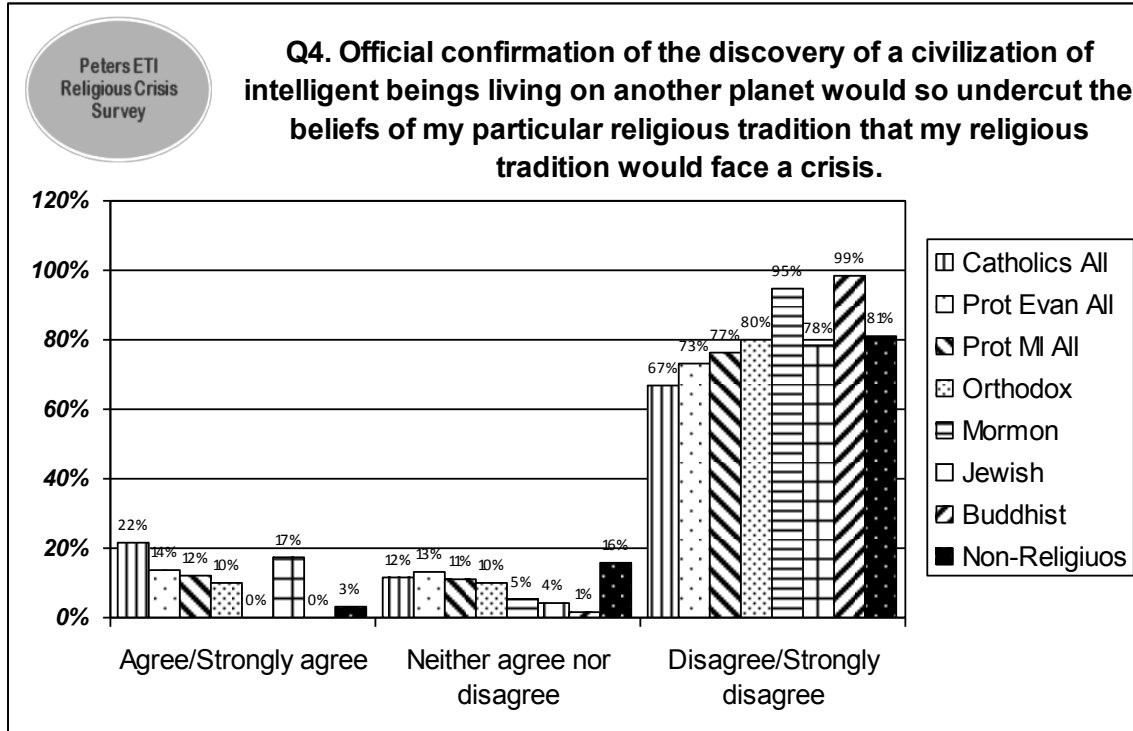
Evangelical Christians who rely upon the pre-Copernican Bible do not seem to be restricted by the de-centering assessment. One commented, “I think that the Bible is the story of God’s relationship with humans on earth. Jesus Christ, God Incarnate, died for the sins of humans. I think that the Bible leaves room for other creatures in the universe, both physical and spiritual.” Another reiterated the same position: “From an evangelical Christian perspective, the Word of God was written for us on Earth to reveal the creator. We were created to bring glory to God. Why would we repudiate the idea that God may have created other civilizations to bring him glory in the same way? “

What we have learned from Question 3 is that those who self-identify as religious believers--virtually regardless of which religious tradition they adhere to--do not exhibit the fear of de-centering. They do not find their faith incompatible with the prospect of contact with ETI.

The next question, Question 4, is also illuminating. It calls upon each individual believer to speak on behalf of his or her religious tradition. Note two things. First, again, the vast majority of adherents to our seven tested religious traditions (plus non-religious) perceive no threat of crisis when engaging ETI. Second, the numbers differ slightly from Question 3 reviewed above: we see a fraction more in the agree/strongly agree category. Might we perceive here a slight worry that one’s religious tradition is more vulnerable to a crisis than one’s own personal belief?

We could easily imagine a devoted religious believer who is confident that he or she is ready and open to receive news of contact with ETI; yet, at the same time, he or she is a tad anxious that the clergy or church hierarchy or conservative factions might find their dogmas threatened. This is suggested by an individual who described him or

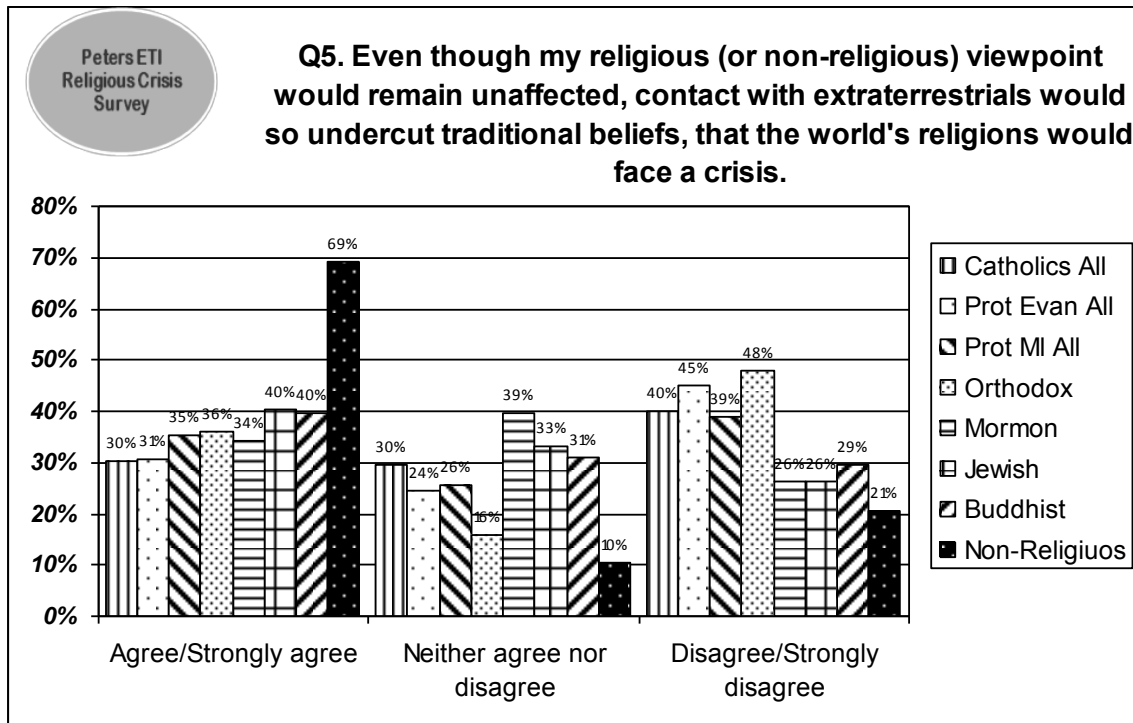
herself as a “loose Christian” identifies religious fragility with religious rigor. “The strict followers of religions would be the most affected by such a finding of extraterrestrial life whereas the loose followers such as myself would welcome the new discovery and be intrigued by the opinions of a different civilization.”



As we turn from judgments made about one’s own religious tradition to judgments regarding someone else’s religion, the question of tolerance enters. Are religious people intolerant or tolerant? Appeal to another survey might be relevant here. A 2007 survey of more than 35,000 Americans conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life uncovered a trend that may be indirectly relevant. Whereas conventional wisdom might suggest that the more religiously zealous a person is the more intolerant he or she would be, this survey indicates that the opposite is true. Zealous Americans are tolerant, even welcoming religious perspectives that differ from their own. To the statement, “many religions can lead to eternal life,” for example, 57 percent of Evangelical Protestants agreed as did 79 percent of Roman Catholics. So did the majority of Jews, Hindus, and Buddhists. What this suggests is “a broad trend toward tolerance and an ability among many Americans to hold beliefs that might contradict the doctrines of their professed faiths.”<sup>9</sup> Now, this survey is limited to Americans and it does not test directly for openness toward ETI. However, if it is in fact the case that many religious people are capable of holding “beliefs that might contradict the doctrines of their professed faiths,” then it might follow that those who welcome ETI into their worldview

<sup>9</sup> Neela Banerjee, “Survey Shows U.S. Religious Tolerance,” *The New York Times* (June 24, 2008) <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/24/us/24religion.html?ex=1214971200&en=fa48d8d17f> accessed 6/24/08.

could do so even if they worry slightly about doctrinal fragility in their own respective religious tradition.



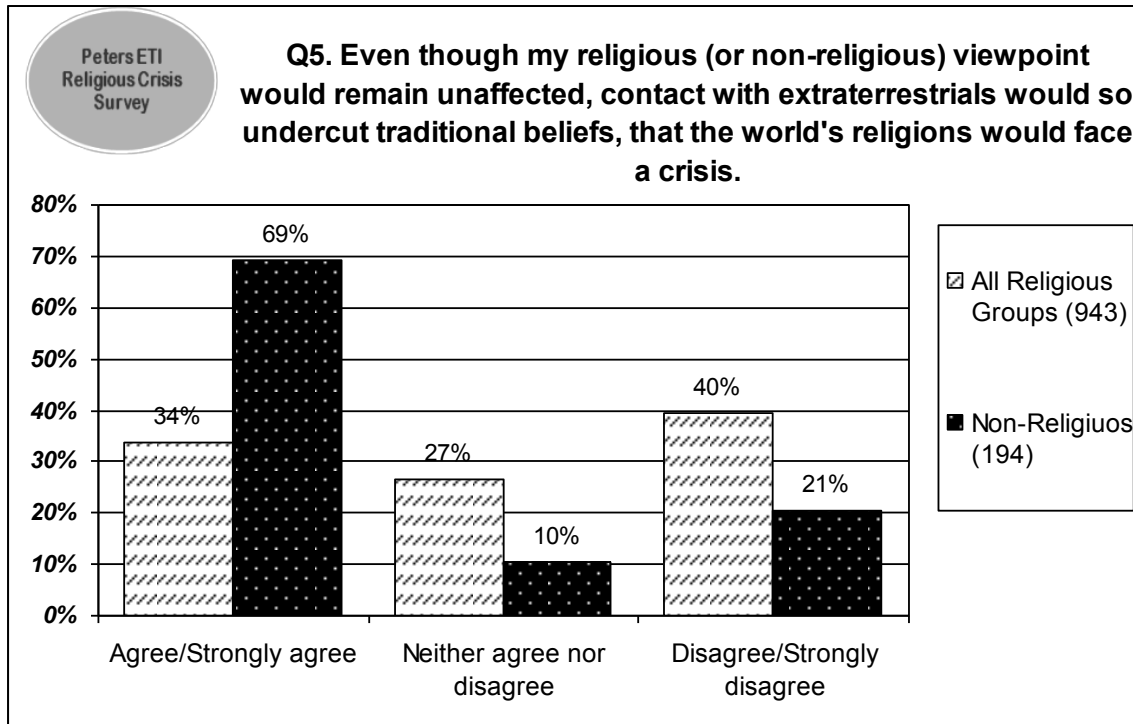
Our insight into religious consciousness begins to deepen a bit when we look at Question 5 where respondents evaluate other religions. The majority remain in the disagree/strongly disagree category. Yet, the agree/strongly agree cluster is significantly higher than in question 3 and still higher than in 4. Those who identify with a major religious tradition give a modest degree of credence to the forecast that the world's religions—religions other than their own—might confront a crisis. *Some* degree of credence, only, we stress; yet, it is still worth noting. Could it be the case that an individual religious believer is slightly more worried about someone else's beliefs than his or her own?

Here is what may be the most fascinating revelation of the survey: *the 69% agree/strongly agree spike suggests that non-believers predict problems for religion, while believers do not.* Why? Might this is due to a misunderstanding non-believers have of believers?

Perhaps this is worthy of closer inspection. So, let us give additional attention to the 205 non-religious persons who responded to the Peters ETI Religious Crisis Survey. In responding to Question 5, a significant majority (69%) of those who identify as non-religious project a crisis for religion. This is twice the average of those who are affiliated with a religious group (34%). That is, the non-religious have a much more negative forecast for religion than do adherents to religion. What might this reveal? Might it reveal some level of commitment to the two arguments noted above, the de-centering and the



more highly evolved arguments? Later we will introduce the concept of the ETI Myth. Might those in the 69% here constitute believers in the ETI Myth? We did not test for this directly.



The survey’s fishing expedition netted the following comment from a person self-identified as non-religious: “Confirmation of alien intelligence might cause a crisis for Protestant fundamentalism and Islam, for which their scripture's failure to predict the aliens could be quite damaging. Catholicism will take it in stride, perhaps developing a teaching that Jesus incarnates on world after world.” As we saw above in our evaluation of the de-centering argument, this prediction regarding Islam and perhaps fundamentalism [at least evangelicals] cannot be confirmed. Yes, Roman Catholicism is likely to take it in stride, especially when we note that the Vatican sponsors an astronomical search for ETI at its Vatican Observatory [see below].

What have we learned from this survey? It is relevant to note how people who embrace a traditional religious belief system do not fear for their own personal belief; nor are they particularly worried about their own respective religious tradition. A shred of evidence suggests that believers in one religious tradition might be more inclined to impute fragility to other religions to which they do not subscribe or about which they know little. The central finding is this: *the hypothesis that the major religious traditions of our world will confront a crisis let alone a collapse is not confirmed by the Peters ETI Religious Crisis Survey.* Furthermore, it appears that non-religious persons are much more likely to deem religion fragile and crisis prone than those who hold religious beliefs.

Of course, there are always exceptions. Here is an interesting reversal of logic that associates religious belief with ETI belief. An individual self-identified as non-religious wrote, "I am convinced that Extraterrestrial life does not exist and that the assumption that they do exist is equivalent to a religious belief."

### **What do theologians say about ETI?**

Let us now turn to theological discussions which are already taking place. But first, a note about terminology. The language used by NASA and SETI includes terms such as *exobiology*, which refers to the search for microbial life within our solar system, and *astrobiology*, the more inclusive term which pursues research on the origin of life on Earth, in our solar system, and beyond. For the discussion that follows, I suggest we employ the term *astrotheology* to refer to religious speculations on the presence of extraterrestrial microbial and intelligent life regardless of where it might be found.

Astrotheologians have for centuries debated the question of whether other worlds with inhabitants exist. On the negative side we find Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). Following Aristotle, he argued that the concept of perfection implied that there could be one and only one world, our earth. Nevertheless, on the other side, some medieval theologians could speculate that life would be flourishing on other worlds among the stars. God could be the author of such life there just as God is the author of life here. John Buridan (1295-1358), for example, held "from faith that just as God made this world, so he could make another or several worlds."<sup>10</sup> And, relevant to our discussion of astrotheology, these other worlds might have different elements and could obey different laws of nature; and they could produce different results.

With the advent of Copernican heliocentrism, many theologians along with scientists began anew to speculate about life among the stars. Among the giants of theology in the twentieth century, Roman Catholics such as Karl Rahner and Hans Küng along with Protestants Paul Tillich and Wolfhart Pannenberg took up astrotheological issues. In my own study of this matter, I could find both acceptance and rejection of the extraterrestrial hypothesis in the history of theological thought, with the preponderance of speculative opinion favoring the existence of separate worlds among the stars.<sup>11</sup> The point here is that the issue of ETI's existence has been long debated; so new information on this topic would not come as a surprise or shock.

On the contemporary scene, we can find examples of how theological speculation positively embraces the prospect of ETI. The Vatican Observatory actively searches for ET. "How can we rule out that life may have developed elsewhere?" Jose Gabriel Funes, director of the observatory, told *L'Observatore Romano*. "Just as we consider earthly creatures as 'a brother,' and 'sister,' why should we not talk about an 'extraterrestrial

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<sup>10</sup> John Buridan, *Questiones super libris quattuor de caelo et mundo*, cited by Steven J. Dick, *Plurality of Worlds*, 29. Dick also provides an illuminating history of thought on the question of extraterrestrial inquiry by philosophers and theologians.

<sup>11</sup> Ted Peters, *Science, Theology, and Ethics* (Aldershot UK: Ashgate, 2003) chapter 6.

brother'? It would still be part of creation." <sup>12</sup> Another Roman Catholic, Georgetown University theologian John Haught greets "encounter with alternative intelligent worlds" as an occasion "for theology to enlarge its sense of God and divine creativity."<sup>13</sup>

In his now classic book, *The Bible and Flying Saucers*, Barry Downing appeals to UFO visitation to provide a scientifically credible justification for biblical beliefs. When it comes to mountains and clouds in the stories of Moses on Mount Sinai or Jesus' on the ascension mount, communication with hovering flying saucers becomes a hermeneutical principle. "Flying saucers were the immediate cause" of biblical religion.<sup>14</sup> Even though many have purported to explain terrestrial culture as the product of ancient alien contact, Downing represents a sophisticated theological assessment of ETI in the UFO domain. At least one Roman Catholic in the *Peters ETI Religious Crisis Survey* would embrace the Downing theory: "I believe that extraterrestrials had a hand in forming some of the ancient civilizations on Earth."

### **Might ETI visiting us in UFOs be demonic?**

Not all contemporary Christian interpreters welcome ETI, however. Website wars debate the question: are flying saucers really Satan's deceptions? Some say "yes," such as Satan's Counterfeits. <http://www.mt.net/~watcher/hate.html>. Some say "no," such as The Bible UFO Connection <http://www.bibleufo.com/index.htm>. On the "yes" side of the debate, Kathy Smith's "UFOs and Aliens," <http://www.fillthevoid.org/Ufo/Devils-in-disguise-1.html> takes a purportedly biblical stance against many items: Channeling (because it is a source other than the Bible), Abductions, Walk-Ins, and most importantly the New Age attempt to see unity in the world's diverse religions: "Overall, the E.T's acknowledge a New Age worldview. This is the belief that all religions are leading down the same path, and all religions point to the same universal truths. The Bible does not teach that all religions lead to God. There is only one way to God, *and that is Jesus Christ. "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus;" (1 Timothy 2:5) and "Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6)*. Coming to expression here is what some consider religious intolerance; and this intolerance colors the interpretation of UFOs.

Although relatively rare, this fear that ETI might be demonic appeared in the *Peters ETI Religious Crisis Survey*. One who described himself or herself as a religious experiencer stated flatly: "It is my opinion that UFOs are manifestations of the demonic." Another said, "As a Christian...I really do not believe that when 'Advanced Aliens' make official contact with the People of Earth that that is who they really are. I believe that when this happens the Beings will really be 'the Watchers' (fallen angels) who have

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<sup>12</sup> Ariel David, "Vatican: It's OK to believe in aliens" AP story, May 13, 2008. [http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20080513/ap\\_on\\_re\\_eu/vatican\\_aliens](http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20080513/ap_on_re_eu/vatican_aliens), accessed May 14, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> John F. Haught, *Science and Religion: From Conflict to Conversation* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1995) 297.

<sup>14</sup> Barry H. Downing, *The Bible and Flying Saucers* (New York: Avon Books, 1970) 106.

finally returned to install the final Anti-Christ upon the Throne of World Government to Rule over Earth!”

In the 1970s some fundamentalists objected to the public’s interest in extraterrestrials, arguing that belief in UFOs as spacecraft constituted a temptation to apostasy. Why? Because the extraterrestrial hypothesis includes reliance upon Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution. As anti-evolutionists, these reactionaries interpreted UFO sightings as temptations by the Devil to persuade Earthlings to believe in evolution.<sup>15</sup> They contended that UFOs appear as Satan’s temptation: if we would believe in UFOs then we would believe in evolution and this means we would disbelieve the Bible, the Word of the true God. Now, this may seem far fetched. Yet, this signals something important, namely, a reactive awareness of the ETI Myth. We will turn to the myth immediately.

### **What about the ETI Myth in science?**

Thus far we have been looking at religion understood as organized religion, as a set of beliefs with continuity over time. We have been listening primarily to spokespersons for specific religious traditions with some attention to those who reject these traditions. Now, in contrast, I would like to use the term ‘religion’ to refer to something else. If we use the term ‘religion’ to refer to structured cultural beliefs, I believe it will illuminate the place given to ETI in contemporary consciousness. Theologian Paul Tillich alerted us that “culture is the form of religion and religion the substance of culture.”<sup>16</sup>

More specifically, I would like to use the term *ETI Myth* to refer to a thought structure common to the UFO community, the SETI community, and perhaps to the wider culture. This myth provides a frame of reference or a perceptual set, a lens through which experience and data and reflection get structured so that they have meaning. My point will be that regardless of the scientific language used to formulate issues surrounding ETI, our way of interpreting ETI is distinctively even if invisibly religious.

Here is the *ETI myth* in its briefest form: we believe that if extraterrestrial intelligent beings exist and can communicate or visit us on Earth, then they are more advanced in evolution, technological progress, and even spiritual or moral progress. I call it a myth because it is a belief without any empirical evidence. This does not mean the myth is false. Rather, it means that it is a potent belief which structures research and interpretation of space phenomena.

Such a myth is a cultural construct, a window frame, so to speak, through which we look in order to view the world out there. In ancient times, myths were stories about

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<sup>15</sup> See Edward Boudreaux, “A New Look at UFOs,” *Christian Life* (August 1976) and the book by John Weldon and Zola Levitt, *UFOs: What on Earth is Happening?* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975).

<sup>16</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (3 Volumes: Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-1963) III:158.

how the gods had created the world in the beginning; and this beginning explains why things are the way they are in our contemporary experience. In the modern world, we think of ourselves as turning to science rather than myth to explain the origin of things. Yet, what ancient myth and modern science have in common is that they both provide a worldview, a frame for understanding and explaining what we experience. Or, to say it a bit more precisely, science contributes to the myths we modern people believe. At work in modern culture is an identifiable framework—a myth, if you will--within which we cast the questions we pose to the mysteries evoked by our experience with outer space.

The myth is cloaked and soaked in science. Specifically, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution combined with belief in progress provides the assumptions with which we work. Having observed the fossil evidence and calculated the evolutionary history of life on Earth over the last 3.8 billion years, we export this idea to the stars. We imagine a genesis of life on an exoplanet and a parallel evolution, perhaps even an evolution lasting much longer than ours has. If biological evolution is progressive—if it progresses toward increased intelligence, toward culture, and toward science and technology—then exospecies who have evolved longer must have progressed further. Such speculation is not warranted scientifically—most evolutionary biologists repudiate the doctrine of progress in speciation—yet we persist to imagine extraterrestrials as more highly evolved and more scientifically advanced.

Again, this does not mean our speculations are false. What it means is that these speculations are without empirical confirmation from either astrobiological data or from Darwinian theory.<sup>17</sup> “The chemical origin of life seemed to depend on such an improbable sequence of events, similar to throwing a die over and over and getting a six every time, that biologists were inclined to think that life elsewhere must be a very rare occurrence,” comments David Darling.<sup>18</sup> To proceed toward affirming a more highly evolved and perfected race of aliens is to proceed without the best science accompanying us.

Let me illustrate with examples from SETI assumptions, the UFO phenomenon, and the wider culture. First, we'll look at establishment science. Physicist Paul Davies provides a good place to begin. “Any alien civilization the SETI researchers might discover is likely to be much older, and presumably wiser than ours,” writes Davies. “Indeed, it might have achieved our level of science and technology millions or billions of years ago...it is more likely that any civilization that had surpassed us scientifically would have improved on our level of moral development, too. One may even speculate that an advanced alien society would sooner or later find some way to genetically

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<sup>17</sup> Christian de Duve is one evolutionary biologist who believes ETI are out there. Christian de Duve, *Vital Dust: The Origin and Evolution of Life on Earth* (New York: Basic Books, 1995) xv. The majority view among evolutionary biologists, however, is to declare that the path toward increased intelligence taken by Earth's evolutionary history is not likely to be duplicated elsewhere, regardless of the large number of hospitable planets there might be in the cosmos. See: Ernst Mayr, “The Probability of Extraterrestrial Intelligent Life,” in *Extraterrestrials: Science and Alien Intelligence*, edited by Edward Regis, Jr. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 27.

<sup>18</sup> David Darling, *Life Everywhere: The Maverick Science of Astrobiology* (New York: Basic Books, 2001) 121.

eliminate evil behavior, resulting in a race of saintly beings.”<sup>19</sup> What is being said here is that evolution is progressive; it leads to the development of science and technology; and it leads to advances in morality. Note that the advance beyond evil in Davies’ scenario is not achieved spiritually, but genetically—that is, scientifically. In short, science saves.<sup>20</sup> This is very significant: Davies is proposing a doctrine of salvation, salvation that comes to us from a science that exists in the skies. Might we think of such a scenario as mythical?

SETI’s architects include Carl Sagan and Frank Drake. Sagan in particular was one of the most anti-religious persons in recent memory. Yet, he believed in secular salvation from the stars. Drake does too, even if a bit more modestly. In a piece these two co-authored we read: “contact with extraterrestrials “would inevitably enrich mankind beyond imagination.”<sup>21</sup> Frank Drake dreams about this enrichment. “Everything we know says there are other civilizations out there to be found. The discovery of such civilizations would enrich our civilization with valuable information about science, technology, and sociology. This information could directly improve our abilities to conserve and to deal with sociological problems—poverty for example. Cheap energy is another potential benefit of discovery, as are advancements in medicine.”<sup>22</sup> Note how this optimism extends well beyond mere contact with ETI. It includes optimism regarding the solution to “sociological” problems such as poverty and energy while giving us a leap forward in medicine. What Drake believes is that science is salvific, and extraterrestrial science would be even more salvific than earth’s science.

SETI has its critics. Edward Regis, for example, dubs such evolutionary optimism as belief in “salvation from the Stars.”<sup>23</sup> What comes packaged in scientific language is secularized religion. Atheist cosmologist and science fiction writer, Fred Hoyle, saw the underlying motivation for belief in ETI: the desire for salvation coming from the stars, but salvation based upon science and not religion. What we are here calling the ETI myth includes “the expectation that we are going to be saved from ourselves by some miraculous interstellar intervention.”<sup>24</sup>

So, we must ask: is SETI science or is it religion? Michael A.G. Michaud, would still defend SETI as science. “Although SETI shares some qualities and some goals with

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<sup>19</sup> Davies, “E.T. and God,” 114-115; <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2003/davies.htm> .

<sup>20</sup> When we speak of science as salvific, the concept of salvation with which we work is a generic classical or philosophical concept. From the Greek *Sōzein* (to save), the idea of salvation includes rescue from a threatening situation or even liberation from an existing oppression. It also includes a keeping safe, so to speak, a guarding or protecting. This implies that the individual or community saved will embody appropriate virtues such as a moral sense, decency, honor, and memory of what is meaningful. See an interesting analysis of salvation in Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981-1982*, translated by Frédéric Gros (New York: Picador, 2005) 182.

<sup>21</sup> Carl Sagan and Frank Drake, “The Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence,” *Scientific American* (January 6, 1997) <http://www.sciam.com/article.cfm?id=000B35F3-A4B2-1C59-B882809EC588ED9F&print=true> .

<sup>22</sup> Cited by Diane Richards, “Interview with Dr. Frank Drake,” *SETI Institute news*, 12:1 (First Quarter 2003) 5.

<sup>23</sup> Edward Regis, Jr., “SETI Debunked,” in *Extraterrestrials*, 243.

<sup>24</sup> Fred Hoyle, *Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society*, 109: 365 (1949), cited by Wilkinson, *Alone in the Universe?* 144.

religion, its method is different. The scientific search attempts to confirm belief by experiment, not revelation.”<sup>25</sup> It is my own judgment that SETI performs good science. The fact that the extraterrestrial hypothesis incorporates mythical components does not in itself determine whether the enterprise is scientific or not. What is decisive is whether SETI pursues progressive research programmes—that is, whether or not it produces new knowledge. Certainly SETI does lead to new discoveries and new knowledge, and we should all be grateful for these accomplishments. SETI’s overlap with religion is simply a cultural observation; and it should not be taken as a criticism. Rather, this analysis provides an insight into the religious dimensions of modern culture which has tried to bury religious sensibilities below a blanket of science.

### **What about the ETI Myth in the UFO phenomenon?**

When we turn from establishment science to UFO history with special attention to the extraterrestrial hypothesis, the ETI Myth—now in the form of the UFO Myth—demonstrates nearly the same framework. We find the exportation of evolution to other planets, the doctrine of progress applied to spirituality and morality, and we find the hope for terrestrial salvation bestowed by heavenly science. What distinguishes the UFO variant of the ETI Myth is the addition of government cover up. Already in 1950 when Donald Keyhoe introduced the new genre of flying saucer books with *The Flying Saucers are Real*, he along with many others down to the present time have argued that the U.S. government knows that some UFOs are extraterrestrial in origin but downplay reports to avoid public panic. Clifford Clift recently wrote: “After years of keeping the public from knowing the truth through disinformation, half-truths, and ignoring the questions, I doubt if the government now will release anything significant about UFOs.”<sup>26</sup> Again, I’m not making a judgment regarding the truth or falsity of the cover-up assumption. Rather, I’m trying to point out that it contributes to the framework for interpreting the meaning of UFO experience and data.

The central theme, of course, is the trust we yearn to place in ETI to bring salvation or its equivalent to Earth. A major theme among the contactees of the 1950s has been the hope that aliens would provide peace on Earth—that is, they would save us from nuclear war or, more recently, from ecological self-destruction. The famed George Adamski, who claimed to meet a Jesus-like Venusian in the California desert in 1952 was astonished at the space visitor’s superior knowledge and understanding. He concluded, “their object is to help us and perhaps to protect us from even ourselves.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Michael A.G. Michaud, *Contact with Alien Civilizations: Our Hopes and Fears about Encountering Extraterrestrials* (New York: Copernicus Books, 2007) 203.

<sup>26</sup> Clifford Clift, “Some exciting cases, thoughts on disclosure,” *MUFON UFO Journal* No. 514 (February 2011) 21. Albert A. Harrison stresses the essential role played in the “UFO Myth” by “cover-up theories (which suggest that the government has evidence of the extraterrestrial nature of UFOs but is hiding it from the public.” *After Contact: The Human Response to Extraterrestrial Life* (New York: Plenum Press, 1997) 67.

<sup>27</sup> George Adamski and Desmond Leslie, *Flying Saucers Have Landed* (New York: British Book Center, 1953) 198.

Truman Bethurum and Howard Menger claimed to have had conversations with female ufonauts. Aura Rhanes told Bethurum that on her own planet, Clarion, people do not age or die. They do not pay taxes and do not commit adultery. Bethurum concluded it was “like heaven.”<sup>28</sup> Menger, in turn, learned from a beautiful woman from Venus the “universal laws” that prohibit killing and violence; and he resolved to embrace these to make Earth a better place.<sup>29</sup> In these two cases the celestial savior brings healing for Earth in the form of teaching. The space philosophers look like ancient Gnostic redeemers who teach us to save ourselves.

More recently, the Raëlian movement, founded in 1974 by Claude Vorilhon, begins with a contact experience. Vorilhon, now Raël, is told by heavenly Elohim (scientists mistaken for gods) that Earth and its creatures are the result of an extraterrestrial scientific experiment: Earth is the result of an atheist intelligent design. Redemption of life on Earth will take place progressively through the application of extraterrestrial inspired genetic technology. Science creates. Science saves.

The threat of nuclear war has not been forgotten by the Raëlians, however. ET speaks: “If humanity does not become wise and peaceful, the existence of your nuclear weapons will mean...you might even destroy yourselves...if you become a threat to us, we will only have to destroy your stocks of bombs without sending offensive weapons against you.”<sup>30</sup> These words are almost a direct repeat of Klaatu’s speech in the movie, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, which we will examine below.

Scholarly interpreters of the UFO phenomenon have picked up on the theme of redemption. After assessing the social anxiety aroused by the threat of nuclear war and the press of population growth, psychoanalyst Carl Jung said he could understand why we might look to flying saucers for salvation: “the present world situation is calculated as never before to arouse expectations of a redeeming, supernatural event.”<sup>31</sup> History of Religions scholar Robert Ellwood discerned among the contactees a distinct utopianism “in which man, freed from the face of the planets, will live generation after generation on great self-sustaining ships in space.”<sup>32</sup>

Psychologist and NASA consultant to space shuttle operations, Albert Harrison, has discerned the mythical element in both astrobiology and ufology. “Two assumptions make it tempting to attribute extraterrestrials with god-like qualities. The first assumption is that any extraterrestrial civilization that we will find is likely to be older than our own....The second assumption is that extraterrestrial civilizations will be benign, even benevolent...[they] are less likely to be subject to repression and political violence, more likely to have their basic needs for food and shelter satisfied, and more likely to develop

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<sup>28</sup> Truman Bethurum, *Aboard a Flying Saucer* (Los Angeles: DeVorss and Col, 1954) 144.

<sup>29</sup> Howard Menger, *From Outer Space* (New York: Pyramid, 1959) 111.

<sup>30</sup> Rael, *Intelligent Design: Message from the Designers* <http://www.rael.org/message> accessed 6/6/2011.

<sup>31</sup> Carl Jung, *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Sky*, tr. R.F.C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959) 21.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Ellwood, *Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America* (Englewood Cliffs: NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973) 144.



economic surpluses that encourage trade” rather than war.<sup>33</sup> Should we expect that evolutionary progress either on earth or elsewhere can take us to “a world without war”? This is the logic inherent in the ETI Myth.

### **What about the ETI Myth as a cultural phenomenon?**

After reviewing all too briefly examples from SETI research and UFO contactee claims, let us turn to our wider culture and its appropriation of the prospect of contact with new neighbors in space. Is such a move to the wider culture warranted? Yes, indeed, according to Gregory Reece, “Saucer culture is a deeply interrelated web of claims and beliefs, with strands of that web reaching far beyond UFO culture into the nooks and crannies of popular culture and popular religion.”<sup>34</sup> The assumptions made by astrobiologists and by the UFO community are broadly shared by modern culture. The late Billy Graham provides a shining example of how the ETI Myth redounds back to, and overlaps with, traditional religion. In an interview Graham said he hoped life on other planets would include “loving, caring societies who are at peace with God and free from sin. I see no reason why other planets should be cursed with the riots, demonstrations, wars, and rebellions which threaten the future of our civilization.”<sup>35</sup> Perhaps ETI have evolved beyond sin and provide a salvific model for our future on Earth.

It is my judgment that our culture crossed a threshold in 1951 with the popular movie, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Faced with the threat of heating up the cold war between the U.S. and Soviet Russia with an exchange of atomic bombs, Earth receives a visit from outer space by Klaatu. Klaatu warns the peoples of our world about the dangers of war. Key here is the inability of political powers to establish peace, because each political leader is loyal only to his or her own nation. Redemption for the planet as a whole, then, must come from an international alliance. From whom? From the scientists. Scientists from different nations and different races all gather at the rim of the landed flying saucer to learn at the feet of the extraterrestrial teacher. Nothing about religion is mentioned. Science has replaced religion, morality, and even politics. Our hope is now in science, even extraterrestrial science.

The dramatic final scene of this movie has had an enduring effect on subsequent UFO understanding, both among UFO aficionados as well as the wider cultural interpretation. “The universe grows smaller every day,” Klaatu told the diverse group of scientists seated at his feet. In this shrinking universe security is now threatened, both on Earth and among the other planets. The new problem is that with the development of terrestrial rocketry we on Earth might send atomic bombs skyward; and this would threaten the well-being of our extraterrestrial neighbors. “If you threaten to extend your violence, this earth of yours will be reduced to a burnt-out cinder. Your choice is simple. Join us and live in peace, or pursue your present course and face obliteration. We shall be

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<sup>33</sup> Albert A. Harrison, *Starstruck: Cosmic Visions in Science, Religion, and Folklore* (New York and Oxford, Berghan Books, 2007) 97-98.

<sup>34</sup> Gregory L. Reece, *UFO Religion: Inside Flying Saucer Cults and Culture* (London and New York: I.B. Taurus, 2007) 3.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Billy Graham, *National Enquirer* (30 November 1976).

waiting for your answer. The decision rests with you.” Klaatu is a Gnostic redeemer, bringing from the heavens the teaching that will save us on Earth. This celestial lesson has become a central theme in the messages delivered to our home planet by alleged UFO contactees; and it is implied in the assumptions made by SETI astrobiologists.

One might object, suggesting that one movie does not define a culture. However, in this case, I believe it does. It appeared on the silver screen after the first half decade of UFO sightings and public attention given to them. This took place within the context of tense fear over Earth’s inability to police itself and to prevent self-destruction. Having been astounded at what science had just accomplished—the invention of the atomic bomb—it appeared that only the power of science turned away from nationalism and toward internationalism could spare us from our own self-immolation. The time was ripe for a new myth of redemption, for what Herrick refers to as “...modern myths arising from science, science fiction, and new religious *scientific mythologies*.”<sup>36</sup> This movie, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* [only one of two movies which authentically reflects the essence of the UFO phenomenon, the other being *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* of 1977] performed this function for our wider culture. It fixed the paradigm followed specifically by the contactees of the 1950s and by the wider culture over the decades.

What I wish to point out is merely that in these three domains—astrobiological science, the UFO phenomenon, and the wider culture---we find sublimated religious hopes, secularized language to express religious sensibilities. Human hopes rise up from deep within the human soul, and these hopes can express themselves in scientific language as well as religious language. The broad category I dub the ‘ETI Myth’ with the ‘UFO Myth’ as a subcategory within it.

Again let me stress that the use of the term ‘myth’ is not in itself a judgment regarding truth or falsity. Rather, it names the perceptual set or belief structure through which new information is filtered and interpreted. Albert Harrison, reminds us that “hypotheses about extraterrestrial intelligence are hypotheses, not facts. A fine line separates the rational process of extrapolating our knowledge of life on Earth to life elsewhere and the irrational process of projecting fantasies, wishes, or fears onto unknown entities whose very existence is in doubt. We try to do the former without lapsing into the latter.”<sup>37</sup>

Let me further stress that the use of the term ‘myth’ is not an attempt to explain away our experience with UFO visitations. This is not reductionism. This is not ufological suicide, to use Kevin Randle’s term. “If you want to commit UFOlogical suicide, just say that all UFO abductions have a terrestrial explanation.”<sup>38</sup> Rather, it is my

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<sup>36</sup> James A. Herrick, “Sci-Fi’s Brave New World,” *Christianity Today* 53:2:20-25 (February 2009)25. “Earlier science fiction, including *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), explored similarly religious themes, notably technological resurrection.” *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>37</sup> Harrison, *After Contact*, 313.

<sup>38</sup> Kevin Randle, “UFOdom’s Most Prolific Author?” interview by Robert Sheaffer, *Skeptical Inquirer* 35:1 (January-February, 2011) 9.

attempt to understand how we understand UFOs, especially when we connect UFOs with the extraterrestrial hypothesis.

## Conclusion

To the focal question of our inquiry—would confirmed evidence of the existence of ETI precipitate a crisis leading to a collapse of the world’s religions?—we have given a negative answer. After looking at survey evidence and at theological discussions, insufficient evidence exists to forecast a large scale crisis of faith. To the contrary, considerable evidence exists that traditionally religious persons would easily incorporate new knowledge of extraterrestrial life into their present worldview.

In addition, when we look at religious sensibilities ambient in our wider culture and at work in assumptions made in ufology and astrobiology, a mythical structure so frames our understanding of ETI that we see how a secular religious vision has grown up that ascribes to extraterrestrial science what looks like a redemptive quality. A secular hope has arisen in our culture. Under the guise of science it cultivates our otherwise religious passion and yearning for salvation. Certainly religion understood as a dimension of cultural aspiration is more than merely welcoming of new neighbors in space.

Before departing this topic, perhaps I ought to add an addendum regarding the relationship between theology and myth. Let us ask: does myth count in theology? No. Most theologians are willing to interpret myths; but they certainly are not willing to believe them in their literal form.<sup>39</sup> Myths tell us about human anxieties and propensities, to be sure; but they do not tell us about the reality of God. It is the task of the theologian to say: don’t believe this myth! Or, at least avoid believing it with a high degree of confidence. Science has not demonstrated that it can save us from self-destruction, whether it be terrestrial or extraterrestrial science.

The core of the incredulity of this myth is not found in its speculations regarding the existence of ETI. Rather, the problem is found in the embedded status of the doctrine of progress within its view of evolution. Biological evolution does not look like technological progress. Nor do spiritual or moral achievement. Realism requires a recognition of human sin and the role of violence in the natural world; and a doctrine of progress—even when projected onto civilizations among the stars--which fails to recognize this looks more like a wish or a fantasy than it does genuine science. Genuine science--realistic science--sticks to observations and cautious theorizing; it is not given to extravagant claims that look more like fanciful dreams than cautious extrapolations. The same goes for sober theology.

A Buddhist respondent to the *Peters ETI Religious Crisis Survey* demonstrates the ambiguity with which we should approach our speculations: “it is impossible to predict

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<sup>39</sup> Rudolph Bultmann gave us the term *de-mythologizing*. “Its aim is not to eliminate the mythological statements but to interpret them.” Whether the myth is ancient or modern, the theologian does not accept a myth literally. A myth must be interpreted in light of what God reveals regarding divine grace and salvation. *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958) 18.

the nature of extraterrestrials. They could be technologically advanced but morally corrupt and vice versa.” Technological progress and moral or spiritual progress are not identical, nor even partners. We have no precedent in earthly experience to even hint that advanced ETI will be benign let alone benevolent. The ETI Myth and to some extent the UFO variant can be faulted for naiveté insofar as they avoid being realistic on this point.

Klaatu was right: the decision rests with us. Based upon human history, we have a strong precedent for choosing aggression, violence, and war. Neither terrestrial science nor extraterrestrial science can save us. If salvation is to come, the theologian must argue, it will come as a gift of God’s grace.

Might UFOs provide the wings on which the angels of grace will make a terrestrial visitation? The facts do not warrant such a belief. Still, I have a secret hope that the ETI Myth will turn out to be true.