Introduction

In the mid-1950s two small groups of individuals with very different histories and interests came together for a short period. Their brief interaction has had long-term effects on a third group of individuals—a larger group by far than either of the two principals. The first group consisted of a handful of people who gathered around a woman called (pseudonymously) "Marian Keech," a student of Theosophy and other esoteric teachings and a practitioner of automatic writing. The second group was composed of sociologist Leon Festinger and a handful of graduate students interested in the growth and demise of messianic movements. The groups' paths crossed after an article in a local newspaper revealed that, through her automatic writing, Keech believed she was in contact with extraterrestrial entities who had informed her that the world would end on a specific date in the immediate future. Seizing the opportunity, Festinger and his colleagues posed as believers to gain entrée to the small Keech following. The predicted date passed without incident, but Keech's predictions nevertheless bore fruit: in 1956 Festinger, Henry W. Riecken, and Stanley Schachter published *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group That Predicted the Destruction of the World*.[1] Thirty years later it was still in print, a cornerstone of contemporary studies of messianism, new religious movements, and those who believe in UFOs.

Interestingly enough, in that same year Edward Ruppelt, who had just retired from heading the U.S. Air Force's UFO investigation (codenamed Project Blue Book), published his memoirs from that assignment.

They included much fascinating information on military UFO encounters, what was known, suspected, or speculated in higher echelons about UFOs, and the politics of the official UFO investigation.[2] Though it was not a scholarly work, it was a lengthy contemporary look at the UFO phenomenon and at official and unofficial attempts to deal with it. Ruppelt's book, however, saw only one reprint — and an attenuated one, at that.

The third group of people — those who have lived in the shadow of the Festinger book — devote time and resources to a more or less serious study of UFO phenomena. It is one of the enduring ironies of the UFO movement that the academic world has paid more attention to a book about a channeler of extraterrestrial messages than to the memoirs of a main actor in the early UFO debate. Subsequent learned treatments of things ufological have almost always focused on groups like the one that surrounded Keech. Indeed, if one were to read only the scholarly literature on the UFO movement (which would be a brief project!), one might well conclude that those who believe in UFOs are socially marginal characters whose ideas are based on the teachings of charismatic Keech-like leaders who preach a twentieth-century salvation by benevolent "space brothers" who intervene in human affairs. That is, one would have to conclude that virtually all UFO believers — or at least all serious students of the phenomenon — are contactees or their disciples.[3] Irving Hexham warned in 1986 that reports of UFO sightings and claims of meeting "visitors from outer space" are a form of pseudoscience that cult leaders can easily exploit to gain undue influence and authority. The March 1997 mass suicide of the followers of Marshall Applewhite has done nothing to dispel this scholarly impression of what it means to be interested in UFOs.

And yet this impression is mistaken, largely because of its origins in the particular interests of a small group of researchers and in the beliefs of scarcely a dozen individuals following a woman whose own beliefs were grounded in esoteric traditions. It is not an accurate representation of the larger UFO community or of the study of UFO phenomena. Still less is it an accurate representation of the place and role of religion or religious ideas within that community. This book seeks to correct this one-sided view of the UFO movement and to present a fuller, more nuanced view of the role of religion in it. That role is inextricably bound up with the UFO phenomenon itself and with the science and the politics of UFOs.

When UFO reports began to surface, the Cold War had just begun and Western leaders were not sure what kind of technology the Soviet Union might have captured from Nazi-held territories at the end of World War II. The fact that people were reporting odd-shaped aerial devices traveling at incredible speeds and making "impossible" maneuvers was cause for alarm, especially for a newly created air force that was charged with the defense of United States airspace. UFO reports were also of interest to scientists and the aerospace industry, which hoped to build aircraft with the kind of speed and maneuverability that was being described by the witnesses. Thus at the outset the UFO phenomenon was unarguably a political as well as a scientific concern. As the years passed, however, it became clear that UFOs posed no (or at least, no direct) physical or political threat to the country, and by the late 1960s most scientists had become convinced that UFOs held no promise for advancing scientific or technical knowledge. Instead, the increasingly fantastic tales of encounters with ufonauts seemed to indicate that the UFO phenomenon was primarily religious in nature. Thereafter, much popular as well as virtually all academic interest in UFOs framed the subject as a matter of belief—and uninformed belief, at that.

However, many of those who had devoted serious effort to the compilation and analysis of UFO reports did not agree with this assessment of the subject. For those investigators, UFOs were a tangible reality amenable to certain modes of scientific study, and the aerial crafts' only certain connection to religion lay in the probable impact that widespread recognition of their existence would have on religious institutions and on people's faith. On the whole, most students of the phenomena took great pains to distance themselves from religious-sounding claims about UFOs and to reiterate the essentially scientific nature of the UFO problem. The tension between science and religion as explanatory frameworks within the UFO community is the subject of this book.

MATERIALS, METHODS, AND GOALS

My first real contact with the UFO movement came in 1992 when I decided to reward myself for years of arduous graduate school labor by reading something light and entertaining.[4] Having never been particularly fond of fiction, I picked up Whitley Strieber's book *Communion: A True Story* instead. What I read both fascinated and terrified me. It was the author's first-person account of his nocturnal abduction by slender,

bulbous-headed, large-eyed creatures. I slept with the lights on for several nights after that! (I am not alone in having this reaction, even in the academic world.)

After reading several more books on the abduction phenomenon, it dawned on me that I had found something I had been looking for since my undergraduate years: a segment of American society to follow through the upcoming change in the millennium. Putting this research project into action, however, entailed doing considerably more reading in the UFO literature, becoming active as a participant-observer in the local UFO scene,[5] and developing and circulating questionnaires in order to round out my qualitative assessments with quantitative data. Some of the initial results of that research are presented herein. My aim has been to unfold the literature that attests to and wrestles with — and sometimes contests — the idea of the reality of UFOs and extraterrestrial life on Earth. My sources are the written (and sometimes oral) statements of those who have figured in the dialogue on UFOs. Their testimony constitutes what I have framed in chapters 1 and 2 as the "UFO myth." I have tried to be discriminating about my source materials and to make plain to my reader where the information is based on solid evidence and where it is based on reports or personal testimony that are (so far) unverified. I have attempted to be a fair and accurate historian in both my presentation of the facts and my presentation of reports. And I have endeavored to provide numerous references so that the interested reader can do follow-up research on matters that are only briefly mentioned in this text. But as Strieber observes about UFO phenomena in general, "The conclusive evidence has not yet been gathered."[6]

If I can be accused of having a personal agenda, it is in wanting the reader to come away with a sense of the conflicting and paradoxical dimensions — and, I feel, the importance — of UFOs and the UFO movement in American society. Whatever historians of the far-distant future are able to say about the reality of UFOs in the twentieth century, I feel sure that they will look upon ufology as one of the more interesting fields of inquiry in our era. Why? Because I believe that Western thought is now at a crossroads, and part of the drama of the crossroads *zeitgeist* is being played out in the UFO community. We are daily assisted by and confronted with the achievements of science, the child of Enlightenment rationalism, which promises us a form of "salvation" in ways both practical and theoretical. Yet many of us find ourselves believing in and studying things that science rejects as at best "merely" subjective or, at worst, as serious threats to the intellectual progress and continued well-

being of humanity. Such is the strength of these "irrationalities" of ours that, covertly or overtly and for a variety of reasons, many of us nevertheless hold them to be in some way true. Such is the strength of science as arbiter of Reality and thus conferrer of legitimacy that we struggle to find some point of accommodation, if not of outright confirmation, for our beliefs within a scientific framework. One manifestation of the effort to reconcile the truths of science with the truths of our beliefs can be seen in "creation science." Another manifestation is the study of UFOs — a particularly compelling manifestation because it involves not only *belief in* something but for many in the UFO community an unarguable *experience of* something.

Although its status as an experiential reality would seem to ground the UFO phenomenon in the natural, rationalized world of science, the peculiar behavior of UFOs and the unlikely events associated with them seem to push it more toward the realm of the irrational. And although many of those who believe that UFOs are real would point out that any highly advanced science might seem irrational (and thus magical and thus nonexistent) to twentieth-century scientists — yet would in fact be eminently logical — others in the UFO community have wondered if perhaps the limits of science's ability to explain reality have been surpassed in UFO encounters. For some this means that an essentially scientific approach to UFOs needs to be augmented by the insights of religious mystics and metaphysicians. For others a mystical or metaphysical understanding all by itself will suffice. For the UFO community as a whole, the challenge is to chart a path through these several ways of trying to make sense of UFO phenomena.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

There is a UFO phenomenon and there is a UFO movement. It is the latter with which I am concerned. However, because the movement is defined by its interest in the phenomenon, the first two chapters of this book present the history of UFO phenomena (primarily in the United States) and how those phenomena galvanized popular interest and led to the formation of a community devoted to their study. Chapter 3 presents the history of the scientific community's formal interest in UFO phenomena and, reciprocally, the history of the UFO community's involvement with science. The chapter covers science's rejection of the idea of UFO reality, the scientific community's attempts to dissuade the American people from belief in UFO phenomena, and ufology's attempts

to win scientific respectability and also popular support. The chapter also reviews the controversial drift by some in the UFO community away from strictly scientific frameworks for understanding UFOs. Chapters 4 and 5 discuss the religious and metaphysical ideas that have emerged in ufological debates and theories, the considerable contributions of abductees and the alien abduction phenomenon to the debates, and the response of established religion to the UFO phenomenon. Finally, the appendix describes the UFO community in the mid-1990s based on information collected from two surveys I circulated at UFO conventions, among local UFO groups, and through UFO-related mailings. The appendix offers a picture of the kinds of people who hold as true parts (or all) of the UFO myth. I would also like to point out that even the cover art for this book has an educational agenda. The piece, entitled "Portal," was created especially for this volume by artist Melissa Reed. A key explaining the thirty-four UFO and UFO-related images in the work can be found at www.mreedartworks.com.

The question inevitably arises as to whether my interest in the subject of UFOs springs from a personal encounter with them. The fact that the question is asked at all intrigues me. If it were asked mainly in the context of a learned colloquium of my academic peers, I might be able to attribute it to scholars' postmodern concern with the relative positionalities of speaker and subject in a discursive matrix in which the hegemonic "gaze" of the abstracted/-ing "other" becomes a colonizing force serving the (phal-)logocentric Word. But besides the fact that some of the questioners are scholars who have little apparent interest in postmodern theory, there is also the fact that it is asked by people from all walks of life in all sorts of contexts — from first-year college students to new acquaintances to members of the UFO community. The universality of the question is one clue to the importance of the UFO phenomenon in the unfolding history of the West. Since the Reformation depopulated the saint-filled cosmos of the Middle Ages, followed by the gradual abstraction and then elimination of God from the cosmos by rationally enlightened, scientific minds, a newly orphaned humanity has been asking, "Are we, then, alone?" The UFO experiences reported by thousands of people are one hint that the answer to that forlorn question may be, "No. We are not alone." Unfortunately, I cannot offer the hopeful reader any personal testimony from which to draw such solace. But I can offer a sympathetic yet critical look at the world of those who say that they can.