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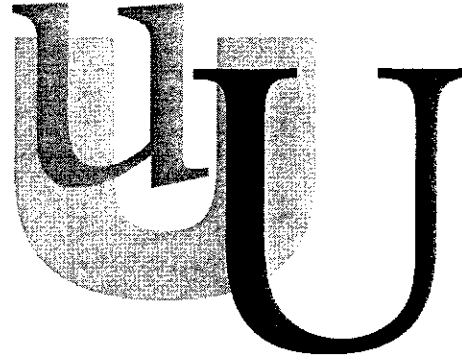
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UFO/FLYING SAUCER CULTS Although UFO (unidentified flying object) sightings occurred in the 1880s, modern accounts of UFO phenomena began after World War II. In 1947, pilot Kenneth Arnold reported sighting (what came to be known as) "flying saucers" near Mount Rainier, and many people insist that a few weeks later an alien craft crashed near Roswell, New Mexico. Speculation persists that the U.S. military keeps the Roswell debris at a top-secret military base in Nevada (popularly called Area 51), and UFO believers reject the U.S. government's official explanation that the downed object was a balloon (with radar and instruments) being tested secretly as a low pressure wave detector for monitoring Soviet nuclear weapons explosions. Consequently, UFO believers harbor deep distrust of government.

Flying saucer cults began in the 1950s after people disseminated tales of their alleged contacts with intelligent extraterrestrial life forms. To their alleged encounters, "contactees" such as George Adamski and Orfeo Angelucci attached religious meaning, which often incorporated spiritualist and theosophical principles with apocalyptic and millennialist themes. These themes reflected growing American cultural fears of communism and nuclear destruction, combined with faith in the salvific nature of technology. Masonic and Rosicrucian ideals and rituals also appeared within some of the early groups and, most recently, in the Order of the Solar Temple. Contemporary UFO groups additionally borrow from "New Age" and Christian doctrines (as

did Heaven's Gate) as well as from the general science fiction milieu. The range of beliefs among these groups is quite wide, including people who claim to have seen UFOs, alleged contactees, alleged contactees who have visited ships or other worlds, reputed victims of alien experimentation, and alleged aliens who live among humans.

Two of the oldest and most studied flying saucer groups are the Aetherius Society (founded by George King) and the Unarius Foundation (founded by the late Ruth Norman). The founders of these groups were "mystagogues" (to use Weber's term), who attempted to mesh theosophical and millenarian principles with modern scientific thought and technology. This sort of "technoanimism" is magical thinking that employs "space" rather than nature imagery amidst faith in the salvific nature of alien technology. A less studied French group, the Raelian movement, operates around the teachings of its charismatic leader, Rael, who preaches salvation through science and alien technology, in the context of the divine nature of human sexuality. Followers seek communion with the divine through sensual meditation, and embrace sexual experimentation that transgresses the boundaries of conventional sexuality (such as homosexuality and transvestism).

The most controversial groups combining UFO belief with variations of contactee assertions are the Order of the Solar Temple and Heaven's Gate. Both groups are distinctly apocalyptic, and they believe that suicide

would provide them with immortality in the (literal) heavens through their contact with space beings. Often groups alleging contact with aliens who impart wisdom shade into the popular theosophical/New Age phenomenon of reputedly channeling messages from higher, more advanced entities. Likewise, Christian-based UFO groups believe that UFOs manifest angels and other spiritual guides that will help believers battle the Antichrist and survive the apocalypse. In contrast, some fundamentalist Christians see UFO phenomena as a precursor to the apocalypse.

Melodie Campbell and Stephen A. Kent

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