

Interpreting UFO Events in a Post-Religious Culture

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In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in unidentified flying objects (UFOs). Although we have increasingly assumed that UFO events are extraterrestrial in nature, there are alternative explanations for these extraordinary phenomena. Of these, the theory that UFOs manifest malevolent spiritual realities is often hastily dismissed because it violates modern society's secular assumptions. As is explained, however, an *a priori* dismissal is arbitrary since it rests on similar evidential grounds. After the case is made that logical consistency demands that the spiritual theory be given a fair hearing, this article draws on U.S. data on reported UFO sightings to demonstrate that a state's religious climate significantly determines the frequency of such sightings there. It is argued that these findings constitute circumstantial evidence that modern society is culturally induced – rather than led by the evidence – to embrace the interpretation that UFO phenomena are extraterrestrial in nature.



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1 Introduction

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in unidentified flying objects (UFOs). As evidenced by the media's willingness to seriously entertain – and, in some instances, openly endorse – claims made at the July 2023 Congressional hearing on “unidentified aerial phenomena” (C-Span 2023) [1] (which could be regarded as the date on which UFOs became a relevant topic for political scientists), it now seems socially acceptable to accept the theory that UFO phenomena are extraterrestrial in origin.

Yet perceptions are one thing, while the manner in which we *interpret* our perceptions is quite another. The extraterrestrial theory is but one – and the culturally acceptable – way to interpret UFO phenomena. Of the alternative explanations that could be presented, the theory that UFOs manifest malevolent spiritual realities is often hastily dismissed because it violates modern society's secular assumptions. As this article contends, however, an *a priori* dismissal is quite arbitrary since it rests on similar evidential grounds.

The next section expounds on why logical consistency demands that metaphysical explanations for UFO events be taken seriously. After removing the stigma of adhering to the spiritual theory, this article articulates a specifically Eastern Christian take on these phenomena, noting interesting – and at times alarming – similarities between accounts of alleged alien encounters and experiences of the demonic relayed in Eastern Christian hagiography. The empirical portion of this paper draws on U.S. state-level data on UFO sightings in order to demonstrate that a state's religious climate significantly determines the frequency of UFO sightings reported there. These findings, it is argued, constitute circumstantial evidence that modern society is culturally induced – rather than led by the evidence – to embrace the interpretation that UFO phenomena are extraterrestrial in nature. The article concludes with a brief summary and final remarks.

2 Why It Is Arbitrary to Dismiss the Spiritual Explanation

On what specific grounds is it now socially acceptable to endorse the extraterrestrial theory on UFOs? Four lines of evidence are often presented: (a) the fact that these objects travel at speeds defying natural laws; (b) eyewitness testimonies; (c) documentary (e.g., photographs and videos) evidence; and (d) authoritative testimonies.

The first line of evidence clearly illustrates the double standards that characterize contemporary thought. The violation of natural laws is held up both as proof that extraterrestrials are real, and evidence that spiritual beings are not [2]. As for the second and third lines, there are countless witnesses of alleged supernatural occurrences – from the Resurrection to the 1968 Marian apparitions in Zeitoun, Egypt – as well as photographic and video evidence for many of these events [3].

Lastly, while much has been made of the testimonies of people in authority, particularly in the military and intelligence establishments, such evidence is by no means unique to alleged alien encounters (moreover, relying on it too heavily risks inviting the charge of having made an appeal to authority). For instance, one could cite claims from such leaders as President Theodore Roosevelt, Dutch Queen Wilhelmina, and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill of having seen Abraham Lincoln's ghost in the White House (Stansfield 2010, 63) [4]. One could also point to overlooked claims by government officials that the UFOs being studied are of supernatural, not extraterrestrial, origin. Luis Elizondo, the famed “whistleblower” who reportedly headed the U.S. Defense Department's Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program, has acknowledged that his superior told him to stop investigating UFOs on the grounds “*that these things are demonic*” (Kaplan and Greenstreet 2021). According to a former rocket scientist, there are also people in the UK government “*who think the phenomenon is real – but demonic*” (Kaplan and Greenstreet 2021).

In short, it is arbitrary to disregard the spiritual theory for UFO phenomenon since the same types of evidence commonly used to substantiate the extraterrestrial theory could also be used in support of the former. To be sure, the spiritual theory might strike many as antiquated and unbecoming of social scientists. Perhaps this is so, however, because society's cultural arbiters have not yet given their blessing to accept it, as they have recently done with the theory – which, but a couple years ago, would have struck people as equally bonkers – that our government is in possession of *space alien* technology and even bodies.

3 An Eastern Christian Perspective on UFO Phenomena

Before the process of secularization – which seems to have transferred the object of man’s natural longing for the transcendent from the spiritual to the extraterrestrial – unfolded in the West, UFO phenomena would have more likely been understood as encounters with malevolent spiritual beings (Georgia Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene has predictably been mocked for holding fast to this traditional explanation) (Burris 2023). Indeed, there are interesting parallels between contemporary reports of alien encounters and earlier stories of demonic phenomena. A case in point is an account of “alien abduction” recently told in a History Channel documentary (History Channel 2022). The alleged space creatures in this story traveled through walls and, most tellingly, smelled of sulfur, which is commonly associated in the Christian tradition with divine judgment and hell. Nevertheless, not once did the narrator acknowledge the possibility that these parapsychical entities were malevolent supernatural beings.

It is worth noting that these parallels were acknowledged in a 1969 U.S. government report (Catoe 1969, iv):

Many of the UFO reports now being published in the popular press recount alleged incidents that are strikingly similar to demoniac possession and psychic phenomena which have long been known to theologians and parapsychologists.

Such incidents are especially familiar to the theologians of the Christian East. Indeed, Christian ascetics have documented numerous and consistent accounts of demonic encounters. The demons are said to exhibit two characteristics that are of particular relevance to this paper. First, they possess the ability to metamorphose. As St. Anthony the Great (n.d., § 42) explains, “*when they come they approach us in a form corresponding to the state in which they discover us, and adapt their delusions to the condition of mind in which they find us.*” Likewise, St. Peter of Damascus (1984, 236) writes that “*the demons take whatever shape they want.*” In more recent times, the ascetic to whom Markides (2001, 102) assigns the pseudonym Fr. Maximos argues that “*Satan... is a real entity who... does not maintain a stable image. When he appears to human beings in ways that he can be seen, he constantly metamorphoses his appearance.*”

What are some of the manifold ways in which the demons manifest themselves? According to St. Diadochos of Photiki (1979, 263), demons can appear as a light or some “*fiery form*” [5]. They can also assume the appearance “*of women,*

wild beasts, creeping things, gigantic bodies, and troops of soldiers” (St. Anthony the Great n.d., § 23). The second noteworthy characteristic of demons is their desire to deceive or frighten people through these varied appearances (e.g., St. Diadochos of Photiki 1979, 263; St. Anthony the Great n.d., § 23) [6].

To sum, the demons are argued to possess the capability of metamorphosing in various ways, and for deceptive purposes. Thus, the very sight of what *appears* to be – especially in a culture conditioned to believe that it is – alien space craft could not, in itself, be taken as evidence that refutes the spiritual explanation of UFO phenomena. On the contrary, such visions are perfectly compatible with this explanation.

Accordingly, per the view articulated by Fr. Seraphim Rose (2008), phenomena that, today, are normally characterized as extraterrestrial in origin are nothing new. What is relatively novel about these extraordinary events is not their occurrence, but rather the meaning that modern society ascribes to them. In the secular culture of the West, interest in science fiction created the dominant interpretive framework used to make sense of these deceptive visions [7]. In the current, post-Christian era, people are increasingly looking to be delivered by beings from outer space, and this new framework “*supplies images of spacecraft and space beings*” (Rose 2008, 101)? Ultimately, Fr. Seraphim (2008, 110–111) explains that the purpose of these UFO phenomena is to prepare mankind for political rule by the “*‘savior’ of the apostate world.*”

4 Theory and Methods

Appearances to this contrary, the theory defended in this article is not that UFOs are of supernatural provenance (for it is beyond the author's ability to scientifically prove this to be the case). However, unless there was reason to believe that aliens happen to have a penchant for visiting more atheistic or occultic places, the discovery that UFO events are more frequently reported in such places would constitute circumstantial evidence of a cultural tendency – as opposed to a scientific or logically-compelling reason – to embrace the extraterrestrial explanation. Therefore, the less ambitious theory is advanced that the religious climate of a society significantly affects the manner in which UFO events are interpreted. Both bivariate and OLS regression analyses on American states are relied upon to specifically test the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. UFO sightings are reported with greater frequency in states that have more atheists.

Hypothesis 2. UFO sightings are reported with greater frequency in states where Wicca is more frequently practiced.

Using figures from the National UFO Reporting Center (n.d.), this dependent variable of this study is operationalized as the number of UFO sightings per 10,000 state population. As for the independent variables – alternative measures of what is referred to as “religious climate” – this study pulled data on the percent share of atheists in each state from the Pew Research Center (2023), and on the prevalence of Wicca in the U.S. from Jensen and Thompson's (2008) study.

Since UFO sightings are not equally distributed across the U.S. (see the Appendix), dummy variables are added in order to adjust for the effects of the two regions that reported UFO sightings most frequently (see the Appendix): New England and the Far West [8]. This study also adjusts for whether education and level of economic development significantly predict UFO sighting frequency, using government data on bachelor's degree attainment (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, Research Division n.d.) and Gross Domestic Product per capita, respectively (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis 2023).

5 Results

Bivariate Analysis

As suspected, there are significantly more UFO sightings per capita in states with higher shares of atheists. Specifically, the frequency of a state's UFO sightings is positively correlated at 52% with the percentage of self-described atheists in that state. There is an even stronger direct correlation of 82% between sightings and the practice of Wicca in U.S. states. In both cases, the p value is below 1%.

Table 1 shows that as many as six of the ten states with the largest number of UFO sightings per capita had an atheist population higher than the national average of 3%, compared to only a third of the states with the smallest number of sightings.

Table 1
Percentage of States Having an Above Average Share of Atheists (By Reported UFO Sighting Frequency)

UFO Sighting Frequency	% of States Scoring Above the National Average for Atheist Population Share
The 10 States with the Highest Number of Per Capita UFO Sightings*	60
The 10 States with the Lowest Number of Per Capita UFO Sightings**	20

* These ten states are Vermont (9.29), Washington (9.09), Montana (8.76), Alaska (8.63), New Hampshire (8.43), Maine (8.40), Oregon (8.25), New Mexico (7.75), Wyoming (7.02), and Idaho (6.85).

** These ten states are Tennessee (3.21), New Jersey (3.06), Virginia (3.04), New York (2.93), Maryland (2.90), Alabama (2.69), Mississippi (2.62), Georgia (2.44), Louisiana (2.41), and Texas (2.00). Furthermore, virtually all of the 10 highest UFO-reporting states had an above average rate of people practicing Wicca, while literally none of the 10 lowest reporting states had an above average rate.

Table 2
Reported UFO Sightings and the Prevalence of Wicca in American States

UFO Sighting Frequency	Average Wicca Rate / 100,000 Population	% of States Scoring Above the National Average Wicca Rate
The 10 States with the Highest Number of Per Capita UFO Sightings*	21	100
The 10 States with the Lowest Number of Per Capita UFO Sightings**	11	0

* These ten states are Vermont (9.29), Washington (9.09), Montana (8.76), Alaska (8.63), New Hampshire (8.43), Maine (8.40), Oregon (8.25), New Mexico (7.75), Wyoming (7.02), and Idaho (6.85).

** These ten states are Tennessee (3.21), New Jersey (3.06), Virginia (3.04), New York (2.93), Maryland (2.90), Alabama (2.69), Mississippi (2.62), Georgia (2.44), Louisiana (2.41), and Texas (2.00).

OLS Regression Analysis

Table 3 presents two sets of OLS regression results that correspond to my two measures of a state’s religious climate. To begin with my control variables, although education was shown to be an insignificant predictor of UFO sightings, coefficients for GDP per capita and region (particularly the Far West) were both statistically significant. A \$10,000 increase in GDP per capita resulted in a 33–47% drop in sightings, depending on the particular measure of religious climate. Although sightings were not significantly higher in New England states in either model, they were 135–140% higher in Far Western states (depending, again, on the model).

As for the independent variables, the positive association between both measures of religious climate and UFO sightings remained statistically significant ($p < .01$) even after GDP per capita, education and region were adjusted for. As results from Models 1 and 2 respectively show, each additional person per 100,000 practicing Wicca produced a 35% increase in reported UFO sightings, while a one-unit increase in the atheist population share yielded a much higher increase of 70%. In short, OLS regression analysis confirmed both of my hypotheses.

Table 3
OLS Regression on the Determinants of Reported UFO Sightings

	Reported UFO Sightings	
	MODEL 1 <i>Measure of Religious Climate: Wicca Rate /100,000</i>	MODEL 2 <i>Measure of Religious Climate: Atheist % Share of Population</i>
Religious Climate	.352*** (.039)	.700*** (.194)
GDP Per Capita	-.000*** (.000)	-.000** (.000)
Education	.056 (.038)	.049 (.057)
Region (Far West)	1.345** (.508)	1.403* (.761)
Adjusted R-Squared	.71	.37
N	50	51

* $p < .1$

** $p < .05$

*** $p < .01$

Numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

While these findings mark an improvement in our knowledge of the determinants of UFO sightings, further research is warranted by the fact that a sizable percentage of the variance in the dependent variable remains to be explained. This is indicated by the adjusted R-squared, which ranges from 37–71% (depending on the model).

6 Conclusion

What, to a Vermonter, is more probably an encounter with space aliens may, to a Mississippian, more likely be an experience of the demonic. There is as yet no scientific reason for dismissing the latter interpretation (and ridiculing Rep. Greene for adopting it). It may also be the case that negative spiritual experiences, regardless of how one interprets them, are more frequent in states in which atheists or Wiccans constitute a larger share of the population. In other words, perhaps faithlessness and Occultism render people more vulnerable to such spiritual events. Clearly, more research is warranted on this subject.

To conclude, the spiritual theory on UFO events should be given a fair hearing for the same reasons that modern society has increasingly accepted the extraterrestrial theory. In removing the cultural blinders that obscure the former's plausibility, people may discover that they are entering into a period in human history that is perilous for both spiritual and – what is relevant for the author's discipline,

even if incomparably less important in the greater scheme of things – political reasons.

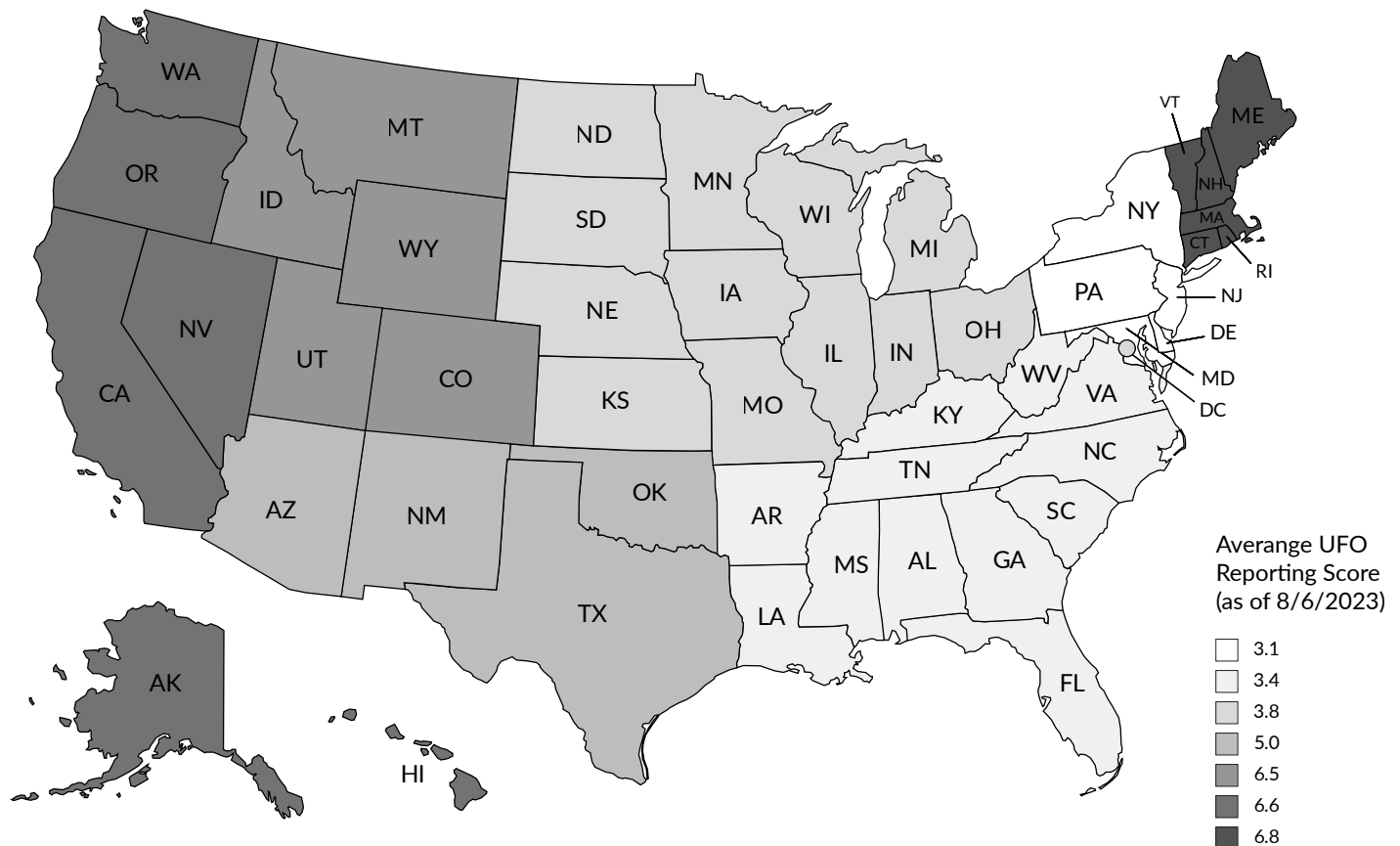
Regarding the political dangers, if people come to believe that they are dealing with hostile physical beings (be they foreign or extraterrestrial in origin), then their government may decide to spend more money on the military, and less on necessary infrastructural or socioeconomic programs, in a futile attempt to shore up national or global security. Alternatively, if they end up viewing these otherworldly beings as benign space visitors who simply wish to assist human civilization, then the government may unwittingly come to cooperate with or obey them, thereby augmenting their pernicious effects on humanity.

The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist.

– Charles Baudelaire

Appendix

Regional Averages of Reporting UFO Sightings (per 10,000 State Population)



Notes

- [1] As the term “unidentified aerial phenomena” (UAPs) appears to be a euphemism intended to remove the stigma of openly endorsing the extraterrestrial theory, alien skeptics like myself prefer the older label of “unidentified flying objects” (UFOs).
- [2] I critically address the notion that we should reject supernatural claims on the grounds that they violate “natural laws” in a 2020 essay (Azarvan 2020).
- [3] In 2010, five percent of Britons believed that they have seen or heard an angel in 2010. Five years later, as much 18% of Americans claimed to have seen a ghost (Linden 2010; Lipka 2015).
- [4] See also *The White House Historical Association*.
- [5] St. Paul appears to express something similar in his second letter to the Corinthians: “*Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.*” (2 Cor 11:14).
- [6] Such experiences as these are still being reported. In my interview of monks at an Orthodox Christian monastery, I inquired on whether they have ever physically seen, heard, or perceived in any other way something that they would describe as demonic. They all laughed as if to say, “Of course!” One monk shared that he often hears strange nocturnal sounds intended, he believed, to distract the brothers from prayer or instill fear in them. Another recounted how he used to often receive a knock on his cell door late at night, only for him to find no one on the other side. Yet another monk relayed that he was once physically restrained by an unseen force, and prevented from praying the *Noera Prosefche* (or the “Prayer of Jesus”). Also, I was shown the location in the monastery where a terrified lay parishioner claimed to have seen a bizarre being who bore what he described as a horse head.
- [7] “*The literary form* [note: of science fiction],” Fr. Seraphim (2018, 73) explains, is a product of the “*post-Christian age*” (evident already in the stories of Poe and Shelley). The science-fiction universe is a totally secular one, although often with “mystical” overtones of an Occult or Eastern kind. “God,” if mentioned at all, is a vague and impersonal power, not a personal being.
- [8] These are the New England, Mideast, Great Lakes, Plains, Southeast, Southwest, Rocky Mountain, and Far West regions.

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