

2012

## Pseudoarchaeology and the ancient astronaut theory : an analysis of a modern belief system

Morgana Sommer  
*California State University, Monterey Bay*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/caps\\_thes](https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/caps_thes)

---

### Recommended Citation

Sommer, Morgana, "Pseudoarchaeology and the ancient astronaut theory : an analysis of a modern belief system" (2012). *Capstone Projects and Master's Theses*. 392.  
[https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/caps\\_thes/392](https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/caps_thes/392)

This Capstone Project is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ CSUMB. It has been accepted for inclusion in Capstone Projects and Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ CSUMB. Unless otherwise indicated, this project was conducted as practicum not subject to IRB review but conducted in keeping with applicable regulatory guidance for training purposes. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@csumb.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@csumb.edu).

California State University, Monterey Bay

Pseudoarchaeology and the Ancient Astronaut Theory: An Analysis of a Modern Belief System

A Capstone Submitted To

The Faculty of the Social and Behavioral Sciences Department

Dr. Gerald Shenk: Chair, Social and Behavioral Sciences, Social History

Dr. Rebecca Bales: Social and Behavioral Sciences, Social History

By

Morgana Sommer

Seaside, California

May 2012

## Acknowledgements

To my family, without which nothing I have achieved would have been possible. With very special thanks to my parents, Ken and Linda Sommer, who have always made my education a priority and whose love and support has sustained me through the highs and the lows that come with life.

To my advisor, Dr. Rebecca Bales, for her unwavering patience, calming words and dedication to her students, without which the capstone process would have been much more painful.

To my capstone professor, Dr. Gerald Shenk, who calmly reassured all of his students that capstone would indeed end, and with hard work we would have a product to be proud of.

Finally, to all of my friends, especially Allyson Scott, who listened to my endless hours of capstone conversation, who read and reread my drafts, and who never abandoned me in my moments of panic. Without all of you I would not have gotten through my college career with my sanity intact, so perhaps I owe the most to you.

## Abstract

This capstone will discuss the Ancient Astronaut Theory and its public acceptance, despite vast criticism from the scholarly community. By laying out the historical context of the Ancient Astronaut Theory and examining some of its most important claims, this paper attempts to form an understanding of why it enjoys such popularity with the general public. The religious theories of Émile Durkheim as well as Claude Lévi-Strauss's Structuralism are used to examine the Ancient Astronaut Theory as a modern beliefs system.

Who are we? Where did we come from? Why are we here? When millions of people are dissatisfied with the old answers to these questions, it is time to re-evaluate the evidence on which the old answers are based.<sup>1</sup>

It was a warm summer's day like any other but the world was abuzz with excitement. The date was July 20, 1969 and just five days prior the Apollo 11 spacecraft was launched from its base at Cape Kennedy, exiting the earth's atmosphere and beginning its lengthy journey towards the moon. On this day more than 500 million people gathered around their televisions and waited in giddy anticipation as the spacecraft made its descent onto the moon, a mysterious place where no human had ever been before.<sup>2</sup> Finally, several hours after the spacecraft's initial landing, the public viewed in awe as the hatch opened and a hero emerged. At 10:56 PM Eastern Daylight Time, the world watched as Neil Armstrong left man's first footprints on the moon and declared proudly, "that's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind."<sup>3</sup> History had been made.<sup>4</sup>

America's amazing accomplishment on that summer's day was the result of over a decade's worth of resources that were put into the National Aeronautics and Space Agency (NASA), which formed in 1958 with the signing of the National Aeronautics and Space Act. The catalyst behind the formation of NASA was the October 4, 1957 Soviet launch of Sputnik,

---

<sup>1</sup> Ancient Astronaut Society, Program, fifth world conference, Chicago, IL, July 27-29, 1978.

<sup>2</sup> "Moon Landing: 40 Years Later," *PBS Newshour Extra*, PBS Online, <[http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/video/blog/2009/07/moon\\_landing\\_40\\_years\\_later.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/video/blog/2009/07/moon_landing_40_years_later.html)>.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Prince and Gisela Telis, "Timeline: America's Space Program," NPR, <<http://www.npr.org/2011/01/26/4748778/timeline-americas-space-program>>.

<sup>4</sup> "Apollo 11," History.com, <<http://www.history.com/topics/apollo-11>>; "Apollo 11 Mission Summary," *The Apollo Program*, Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, <<http://www.nasm.si.edu/collections/imagery/apollo/as11/a11sum.htm>>.

the first artificial satellite ever to be successfully placed in Earth's orbit.<sup>5</sup> This event sparked the famous "Space Race" between the United States and the Soviet Union, encouraging the United States government to begin investing heavily into research and space exploration. For the United States, space was simply the natural progression of the national ideal of manifest destiny and, being in the heart of the Cold War, America could not allow the Soviet Union and communism to conquer space before them. The twelve years between the launch of Sputnik and the American moon landing were laden with successful launches and tragic failures, but in the end it was that July day in 1969 when the world finally observed man's power to accomplish what never seemed accomplishable. With the moon landing the universe was suddenly so large and yet so small: anything was possible.<sup>6</sup>

While humanity has always looked toward the skies and wondered what was out there, the late nineteenth through the twentieth century brought unrivaled feats of science and technology that shifted people's worldviews and blew open the doors of what was possible. In literature and media, the new genre of science fiction was beginning to gain momentum and become extremely popular, with space and extraterrestrial themes becoming increasingly prevalent. Books such as H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*, published in 1898, were some of the earliest works to portray alien civilizations as competitive cultures, building off Charles Darwin's idea of the "survival of the fittest."<sup>7</sup> This theme of interaction and competition between humans and extraterrestrials has continued to be very popular in science fiction, with such examples as *Star Trek* (first airing in 1966) and *Star Wars* (first released in 1977), each of which

---

<sup>5</sup> "The Space Race," History.com, <<http://www.history.com/topics/space-race>>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.; Steven J. Dick, "Why We Explore: The Birth of NASA," *Beyond Earth*, NASA, <[http://www.nasa.gov/exploration/whyweexplore/Why\\_We\\_29.html](http://www.nasa.gov/exploration/whyweexplore/Why_We_29.html)>; Prince and Telis.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Pollom, "A Timeline of Aliens in Science Fiction Literature," Depauw University, <[http://acad.depauw.edu/~aevans/UNIV197/WebPages/Fall2002/ChrisLiz\\_Scott/webpages/inliterature.htm](http://acad.depauw.edu/~aevans/UNIV197/WebPages/Fall2002/ChrisLiz_Scott/webpages/inliterature.htm)>.

went on to be a huge and lasting cultural phenomenon in both the United States and throughout the world.<sup>8</sup> This combination of advances in technology, success in space travel and the rise of science fiction created an environment where alternative ideas about extraterrestrials and their possible interaction with humans (both in modern and historical times) were able to form and thrive.

One such idea that came out of this environment was the “Ancient Astronaut Theory,” which claims that extraterrestrials played an instrumental role in both the evolution and civilizations of ancient man. This “theory” can date its origins back so far as the late nineteenth century with the rise of science fiction, however, it was not made popular until 1968 when Erich von Däniken wrote *Chariots of the Gods?*, which was his first book on the subject. The book was immediately a best seller and since then von Däniken has continued to write 26 volumes on Ancient Astronauts, selling more than 63 million copies worldwide.<sup>9</sup> The hugely popular movement has developed a substantial following and continues to further fascinate people, especially with the copious amount of books by Ancient Astronaut theorists and the creation of the History Channel series entitled *Ancient Aliens*.<sup>10</sup> While von Däniken and his contemporaries sell their theory as the true history of mankind, scholars have classified it as pseudoarchaeology<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Luaine Lee, “Star Trek turns 40,” *The Mercury News* (San Jose, CA), August 18, 2006, <<http://web.archive.org/web/20060901115942/http://www.mercurynews.com/mld/mercurynews/entertainment/15305203.htm>>; “Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope,” IMDB, <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0076759/>>.

<sup>9</sup> “Home,” *Welcome to the World of Mysteries of Erich von Däniken*, <<http://www.daniken.com/e/index.html>>; “Bibliography,” *Welcome to the World of Mysteries of Erich von Däniken*, <http://www.daniken.com/e/bibliography.shtml>.

<sup>10</sup> “Ancient Aliens,” History.com, <<http://www.history.com/shows/ancient-aliens>>.

<sup>11</sup> Pseudoarchaeology is a broad category of pseudoscientific archaeologies. Other names associated with pseudoarchaeology are “cult archaeology,” “fantastic archaeology,” “folk archaeology,” and “alternative archaeology.” These terms may sometimes be used interchangeably to describe pseudo archaeological phenomenon.

(more specifically “cult archaeology”), placing it alongside Creationism and the Lost Continent of Atlantis.<sup>12</sup>

I was initially interested in looking at the conflict between the public perception of cult archaeology and the contrasting views in the scholarly community. However, as I delved more deeply into the topic I became increasingly fascinated with what made these cult archaeologies so popular with the public. In order to formulate a satisfactory response, I needed to develop research questions. My main research question was: What are the elements of pseudoarchaeology, specifically the Ancient Astronaut Theory, which makes it so popular with the public despite the scholarly community’s disapproval? My secondary research questions included:

- How is the Ancient Astronaut Theory able to gain legitimacy with the public despite its lack of empirical proof?
- How do the different fields of the social sciences address the Ancient Astronaut Theory and similar pseudoarchaeology? How do they differ from one another?

Employing these questions, I began to perform my research using databases (JSTOR, EBSCOhost, Project Muse, Sage Journals, WorldCat), as well as Internet (Google Scholar, Google Books) and library resources to find scholarly books and articles, in addition to books written on the Ancient Astronaut Theory. I also utilized Internet search engines (Google, Bing) to find more material on the background of my topic as well as information to help place it in its appropriate historical context. Once I had gathered all of my sources, I analyzed them using historical and qualitative methods, and from that analysis structured this paper.

Based on the findings of my research, this capstone addresses several aspects of the Ancient Astronaut Theory. It presents a succinct description of the Ancient Astronaut Theory, as

---

<sup>12</sup> John R. Cole, “Cult Archaeology and Unscientific Method and Theory,” *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory* 3 (1980): 1-33.



well as looks at how pseudoarchaeology is viewed in the different disciplines within the social sciences. Further, in order to address the primary research question, this capstone analyzes the Ancient Astronaut Theory, and general pseudoarchaeology, as a modern belief system. I structure my arguments using an integrative theoretical framework that mainly utilizes the religious social theory of Émile Durkheim and the myth theory of Claude Lévi-Strauss. Finally, this paper argues that it is the Ancient Astronaut Theory's function as a belief system that makes it so powerful and popular with the general public.

In order to understand the conversation surrounding the Ancient Astronaut Theory, we must first look at the main premises of the ideology. The Ancient Astronaut Theory came about as a way to explain the development of human civilization on earth. This theory states that sometime in human prehistory, advanced extraterrestrial beings visited earth. According to this ideology, these beings brought us technological advancements that helped ancient civilizations accomplish some of their greatest architectural and cultural feats. Essentially, the Ancient Astronaut Theory gives credit for much of human accomplishment to non-terrestrial sources, which is one reason why the theory itself is controversial amongst scholars and many of the descendants of the cultures mentioned in the theory. The Ancient Astronaut Theory also claims that extraterrestrials interbred with the existing humans (in their primitive form), directing and expediting human evolution. The evidence for these claims is mainly derived from reinterpretation of myths and spiritual texts, taken from different cultures around the world, as well as examination of physical culture, including architecture and artwork.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Erich von Däniken, *Chariots of the Gods?: Memories of the Future – Unsolved mysteries of the Past*, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1970.; <<http://www.history.com/shows/ancient-aliens>>; "The Mission," *Ancient Aliens*, May 4, 2010.

The core premise of von Däniken's theory is that "the gods of antiquity were alien astronauts, nothing else!"<sup>14</sup> The Ancient Astronaut Theory argues this by claiming that mythology has a basis in real life events, and therefore these stories can be interpreted as a loose historical record. For example, many cultures throughout history have believed that their gods descended from the sky and created humanity. The Ancient Astronaut Theory claims that Greek and Roman mythology distinctly paints the origins of their gods as being from the sky, and the gods descend and interact with humans with regularity. They also assert that an even more ancient example, the Babylonian creation myth *Enuma Elish*, has the Annunaki (meaning "those who from the heaven came") coming from the skies and creating the human race. Finally, Ancient Astronaut theorists claim that the Ancient Egyptians adamantly believed that their gods descended from the skies to the earth and that this theme runs through the spiritual literature of additional cultures, including the Ancient Chinese, the Judeo-Christian tradition and others. Because this is such a prevalent theme, the Ancient Astronaut Theory claims that those who descended from the sky were not gods, but rather extraterrestrials that were mistaken as such by ancient humans.<sup>15</sup> Ancient Astronaut theorists attempt to further prove this claim by looking at ancient artwork, such as that by the Tassili in the Sahara, that to them clearly exhibits modern space equipment, such as helmets and space suits, but in ancient times.<sup>16</sup>

The Ancient Astronaut Theory takes the assertion that gods are extraterrestrials one step further by claiming that these extraterrestrials were both responsible for the seeding of life on earth as well as human evolution. For the former claim, the Ancient Astronaut Theory looks towards the theory of Directed Panspermia, first published in 1973 by Leslie Orgel and Francis

---

<sup>14</sup> Christopher Partridge, ed. *UFO Religions*, London: Routledge, 2003, 179.

<sup>15</sup> "The Evidence," *Ancient Aliens*, April 20, 2010.; "The Visitors," *Ancient Aliens*, April 27, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> von Däniken, photo insert after page 106.

Crick, the latter of whom is one of the biologists responsible for unraveling the structure of human DNA. This theory is an adaptation of the accepted Astrophysics theory of Panspermia, which asserts that life formed in one place in the universe and then subsequently spread. Directed Panspermia states, however, that organic material was purposefully brought to Earth in order for life to start, and did not make its way here by accident. While this theory is certainly fascinating, it is important to note that the authors of it did admit at the time of its publication that there was little scientific evidence to determine the probability of this having occurred.<sup>17</sup>

Ancient Astronaut theorists look at mythology and spiritual literature that shows the interbreeding of gods with humans in order to address the claim that ancient aliens helped direct human evolution. This mythology exists all over the world, from the Judeo-Christian tradition (with Jesus as the son of God), to Greek and Roman Mythology (in which the gods continually mated with humans, creating a more advanced species, the “demi-gods”), to Native American Legends (one example being the interbreeding of the “Star People” with Zuni women). Since the Ancient Astronaut Theory accepts that the gods were in fact ancient aliens, Ancient Astronaut theorists use these stories to provide evidence that extraterrestrials interbred with humans in order to create a superior species.<sup>18</sup> This explanation is intriguing because while it draws from different religious traditions around the world, it also negates the premises of these religions by providing less spiritual answers to human origin. These claims also seemingly negate the theory of evolution in its current form because they promote an idea of assisted evolution, instead of the current understanding of mutation and survival of the fittest.

---

<sup>17</sup> “The Visitors.”; Francis Crick and Leslie Orgel, “Directed Panspermia,” *Icarus* 19 (1973): 341-346.

<sup>18</sup> “The Visitors.”; “The Mission.”; von Däniken, 52-55, 64-65.

An additional premise of the Ancient Astronaut Theory is the idea that advanced technologies existed in ancient times; technologies that we have just now begun to understand and use ourselves. Firstly, they claim to have evidence of aviation technology in ancient cultures. One example they use is the Saqqara Bird, discovered in Saqqara, Egypt during the excavation of the Pa-di-Imen tomb. While conventionally considered to be a small wooden model of a bird, Ancient Astronaut theorists claim that it is unlike other bird sculptures found and clearly more resembles a modern glider or aircraft than a bird. Further evidence used to support this claim comes from the Tolima Period in Colombian history. Ancient Astronaut theorists believe that a few small gold figurines, found in the Magdalena River Valley of Colombia, are closely reminiscent of modern fighter jets with a fuselage, tail fin, stabilizers and a triangular shape. They also claim to have made scale models of both artifacts, which flew with little alteration besides adding a stabilizing fin to the Saqqara Bird.<sup>19</sup>

Another technology that the Ancient Astronaut Theory suggests existed thousands of years before modern use is nuclear power. Much of the proclaimed evidence for this comes from the Judeo-Christian Tradition, with both the Ark of the Covenant and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. According to the premier episode of *Ancient Astronauts*, entitled “The Evidence,” the bible gives many descriptions of people who came into direct contact with the Ark of the Covenant being “smitten to death.”<sup>20</sup> One example of this is in the book of 2 Samuel, when Uzzah reaches out to steady the “Ark of God,” but as a result God “struck him on that spot,

---

<sup>19</sup> “The Evidence.”

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

and he dies there.”<sup>21</sup> “The Evidence” features Ancient Astronaut theorist Giorgio A. Tsoukalos, who goes on to claim that,

Sometimes people after they encountered the Ark started to lose their nails and started to lose their hair. So, we have evidence of some type of radiation poisoning which was in direct correlation with the Ark of the Covenant. And so the Ark of the Covenant housed an extraterrestrial device which was given to the Israelites during their 40 year wandering through the desert.<sup>22</sup>

As for the tale of Sodom and Gomorrah, the story goes that Lot and his family were met by angels and hastened out of the city before the destruction. They were told to hurry along and hide in the mountains a few miles away, but Lot’s wife turned around and witnessed the destruction and, as worded by Erich von Däniken, “fell dead on the spot” (although the biblical reference states she “was turned into a pillar of salt”).<sup>23</sup> Erich von Däniken postulates that this event is an example of a nuclear bomb in biblical times, not set forth by an omnipotent god but rather by an extraterrestrial race that was determined to destroy a group of people they found undesirable. He claims that Lot and his family were rushed to the mountains because the stone faces would protect them from the radiation of the blast and that the description of the event (“the Lord rained sulphurous fire upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah...”) was eerily similar to what was seen with the dropping of the Atom Bomb upon Hiroshima and Nagasaki in World War II.<sup>24</sup> Ancient Astronaut theorists use these stories as proof of technologies we believe to be modern existing thousands of years ago.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> 2 Sm 6:6-7 (New American Bible).

<sup>22</sup> “The Evidence.”

<sup>23</sup> von Däniken, 45.; Gn 19:26 (NAB).

<sup>24</sup> Gn 19:24 (NAB).

<sup>25</sup> “The Evidence.”; von Däniken, 43-46, 49.; Gn 19:1-29 (NAB).

The last hypothesis of the Ancient Astronaut Theory that I will discuss is the idea that extraterrestrials were responsible for the megalithic architectural feats of ancient civilizations. Before I begin talking about some of the evidence used to defend this, it is significant to mention that Ancient Astronaut theorists do not believe that aliens themselves built these monuments. However, they do believe that extraterrestrials gave humans the knowledge and technology needed to successfully complete the construction of these monuments. Some of the most famous sites that the Ancient Astronaut Theory attempts to explain exist in Egypt. In Giza, Egypt, temples are made of several hundred-ton blocks, making them difficult, at the least, to transport and maneuver into their place in the architecture. There is also the pyramid of Cheops, which von Däniken believes to be one of the strongest pieces of evidence of extraterrestrial assistance. He claims that the ground had to have been leveled by sophisticated machinery, and questions how the stone needed to build the great pyramid was transported to the site without the use of the horse and carriage. He even goes so far as to claim, “today, in the twentieth century, no architect could build a copy of the pyramid of Cheops, even if the technical resources of every continent were at his disposal.”<sup>26</sup> The underlying justification for this is that since we do not understand the methods in which they accomplished their great architectural feats, there must have been outside assistance that provided advanced technology. This view carries over to many other ancient sites including Pumapunku in Bolivia, Machu Piccu in Peru, the statues at Easter Island, among countless others.<sup>27</sup>

While I have only given a brief overview of some of the main points of the Ancient Astronaut Theory, patterns of rationalization emerged in my research. Overall, the main

---

<sup>26</sup> von Däniken, 96.

<sup>27</sup> “The Evidence.”; von Däniken, 91-100, 110-117.

explanation that the Ancient Astronaut Theory hinges on is that ancient humans, without the intervention of advanced species, were incapable of their accomplishments and that they simply misunderstood the things that they saw, and interpreted them as divine. While proponents of the Ancient Astronaut Theory give extensive substantiation in support of their claims, scholars accuse the evidence of being misinterpreted and carefully selected to support the assertions, instead of the assertions being formulated to fit the evidence.<sup>28</sup> Due to this apparent lack of empirical evidence and misuse (or absence) of the scientific method, the scholarly community qualifies it as pseudoarchaeology and does not see it as a valid alternative to mainstream historical thought.

In order to begin to understand cult archaeology, it is important to isolate some of the characteristics that define it and make it identifiable as separate from mainstream science. According to John R. Cole, in his article “Cult Archaeology and Unscientific Method and Theory,” there are five main traits that are emphasized in cult archaeology that make it distinct from science. The first of these is “atheoretical particularism,” which is a concept in which “claims are made and debated with little or no attention to their implications beyond a limited, self-contained system of explanations.”<sup>29</sup> In this sense only the claim and the particular elements that create it are important and all outside explanation is ignored because their “theory” (or perhaps more accurately, their assertion) is considered self-explanatory. The next trait is “narrowness of interest to a specific topic or claim,” where only the data that supports said claim is explored and accepted.<sup>30</sup> The third trait is “oversimplification.” This is a criticism of cult archaeology’s tendency to see the world in terms of black and white, accusing the Establishment

---

<sup>28</sup> Cole, 10-11.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 6.

of being unwilling to accept new ideas while the cultists promote themselves as the bringers of light. The fourth trait of cult archaeology is that it “appeals to belief and authority” and therefore “authorities (both individuals and principles) are challenged and criticized for their authoritarianism, but people are asked to accept new authorities (who often profess humility), whether because of arguments or leaps of faith.”<sup>31</sup> This transforms the debate about history from which theory is most accurately based on the evidence, to whom one should unquestioningly follow based on the idea that if it is written, it is true. The last trait Cole mentions is “ambivalent elitism,” in which the established science is vilified yet the cult seeks and desires endorsements from authorities and respected individuals of that community. All of these traits are occasionally seen in mainstream science, but the difference is that they are emphasized in cult archaeology, while science attempts to minimize or eliminate them.<sup>32</sup>

Pseudoarchaeology, in its many forms, is actually a fairly controversial subject amongst scholars. While most scholars can agree that cult archaeologies, such as the Ancient Astronaut Theory, are unscientific in the way they are formulated and presented, the significance of such theories and how they should be treated is hotly debated within and between the separate fields of the social sciences. In fact, Cole has indexed the gamut of reactions by the scholarly community into the following nine distinct categories:

- (a) Disdain – Cult archaeology is trivial and not worthy of professional attention; attention to it lowers professional standards and surrenders to popularization.
- (b) Indifference – Cult archaeology is irrelevant to science, so it makes no difference how or if professionals react; like any fad, it will go away.
- (c) Relativism – We should not condemn what we happen not to believe.
- (d) Silver lining – Any publicity is good publicity, and archaeology needs all of the friends it can recruit, whatever the medium. We may be aghast at excesses, but in the

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 5-7



- long run wheat and chaff will separate; in the meantime we can capitalize upon the popular interest.
- (e) Open mindedness – Today’s cult may be tomorrow’s orthodoxy, and we should go out of our way to preserve and encourage speculation; at the least we should recognize that all the evidence is not in yet, and we should refrain from comment and conclusions until it is.
  - (f) Frustration – It *is* frustrating and disheartening to have students and other nonprofessionals as “hecklers” on this issue, but we are helpless to do anything except hope it goes away.
  - (g) Positivism – Science is definable, and cult archaeology can and should be held to it’s rules, testing claims and arriving at interim conclusions in order to encourage the idea of solving problems like this one rationally; sciencing is a valuable way of thinking, and *unscientific* thought is non-constructive and potentially dangerous to society and/or the profession.
  - (h) Millenarianism – Establishmentarianism will soon get its “comeuppance,” and the sooner we achieve Consciousness III<sup>33</sup>, the better; science is either bad or wrong and needs to be replaced by a “peoples’ science.”
  - (i) Intimidation – Whatever one thinks of cult archaeology, it is dangerous. Any involvement in its volatile issues will only hurt professionals, either among colleagues or the public (or both).<sup>34</sup>

While these opinions are certainly diffused throughout the scientific community, there are two very distinct viewpoints that seem to be the most discussed. Referencing the previous categories of reaction, the first viewpoint (mainly consisting of archaeologists and historians) approaches cult and folk beliefs with frustration, positivism, intimidation, and disdain, while the second viewpoint (consisting mainly of anthropologists and a small group of archaeologists) looks at these same beliefs with relativism and open mindedness.

---

<sup>33</sup> Consciousness III refers to the idea of an evolved human consciousness. In level I, humans do not understand the world around them and therefore fear it. Level II consciousness evolves to an understanding of the world, and yet humans are limited by their perceptions because these understandings are incomplete. At this stage, the world is seen as rigid and something that is interacted with, but has concrete and unchanging rules. In level III consciousness, the world would be viewed as something that can be affected and distorted. Instead of creating explanations of way things are, humans would develop a vision of what they wanted to create. Through nurturing these visions, they would become a reality in themselves, making restrictive explanations obsolete.; Richard Brodie, *Level 3 of Consciousness*, <http://www.memecentral.com/level3.htm>.

<sup>34</sup> Cole, 16-17.

Firstly, let us look at the arguments against cult archaeology. In general, those who speak out against pseudoarchaeology see it as potentially dangerous and, if nothing else, misleading to the public. Archaeologist Kenneth Feder and historian Garret Fagan, two of the most vocal critics, state in their article “Crusading Against Straw Men: An Alternative View of Alternative Archaeologies,”

Certainly most of us in academia, perhaps especially those trained in anthropology, are sympathetic to ‘alternative lifestyles’, recognizing their intrinsic value and celebrating them as reflections of diversity in human behavior. So what’s not to love about ‘alternative’ archaeologies? Well, lots, actually. ‘Alternative’ archaeologies are not necessarily innocuous expressions by perfectly nice people searching for a salubrious past, and, hey, who are we to criticize their beloved pasts anyway? Mixed into the panoply of ‘alternative’ are a host of reconstructions that are anti-reason and anti-science, or, worse, hyper-nationalistic, racist and hateful.<sup>35</sup>

They view the creators of pseudoarchaeology as frauds who are “bent on proving, through the misuse of archaeological evidence, all sorts of untenable racist theories, particular religious ideologies, and various esoteric views of reality.”<sup>36</sup> Archaeologists see this as a dangerous misrepresentation of their field, and accuse cult archaeologists of taking advantage of the public’s interest in archaeology in order to sell their ideologies. While archaeologists are certainly not alone in their views of cult archaeology, they have the most reason to reproach it on grounds other than its fallacious nature. This is because it is advertised as legitimate archaeology and as such represents the entire field, especially to an uninformed public. This main intention of this viewpoint is that if pseudoarchaeology is not developed scientifically, then it should not be sold to the general public as science.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Garret G. Fagan and Kenneth L. Feder, “Crusading against Straw Men: An Alternative View of Alternative Archaeologies: Response to Holtorf (2005),” *World Archaeology* 38, no. 4 (2006): 720.

<sup>36</sup> Kenneth L. Feder, “Irrationality and Popular Archaeology,” *American Antiquity* 49, no. 3 (1984): 526.

<sup>37</sup> Fagan and Feder, 726.

While some in and out of the field of archaeology take a harsh stance against pseudoarchaeology, there is another view that sees cult archaeology as a cultural phenomenon and subject of anthropological interest. Scholars who subscribe to this view are not willing to simply dismiss cult beliefs due to their fallaciousness. Cornelius Holtorf argues in his article “Beyond Crusades: How (Not) to Engage with Alternative Archaeologies” that, “we need to understand better the specific contexts from which, in each case, the fascination for a particular approach to archaeology and the resulting interpretations of the past emerge, and appreciate the (maybe changing?) social and cultural needs to which they respond.”<sup>38</sup> This more anthropological view of pseudoarchaeology focuses heavily on creating an understanding of the development of these beliefs and because of this does not seek to condemn them as ramblings of an uneducated and uninformed public. Anthropologist Michael G. Michlovic, one of the more vocal critics of Archaeology’s stance on folk archaeology states:

It is clear that my critics and I approach folk beliefs from entirely different angles. They emphasize that folk beliefs about the past are mistaken; I consider them appropriate objects of anthropological examination. The denigration of folk beliefs as dangerous nonsense, racist, etc., develops out of the need that some archaeologists feel to demarcate and defend the domain of their professional concern. I feel that our aim should be to understand how and why human beings live and believe as they do, not to set forth what they should or should not believe.<sup>39</sup>

They insist that how people view different explanations of the world is dependent on a number of factors, and that,

Certain viewpoints which some of us may feel compelled to refute and dismiss others will see a strong need to respect and defend, each reaction based on specific values and personal choices. It matters whether somebody speaks as descendant, moral being,

---

<sup>38</sup> Cornelius Holtorf, “Beyond Crusades: How (Not) to Engage with Alternative Archaeologies,” *World Archaeology* 37, no. 4 (2005): 549.

<sup>39</sup> Michael G. Michlovic, “On Archaeology and Folk Archaeology: A Reply,” *Current Anthropology* 32, no. 3 (1991): 322.

citizen or religious believer, whether he or she trusts most a popular leader, the Old Testament or Karl Marx.<sup>40</sup>

Due to the multitude of factors that lead to the creation and acceptance of any given theory, this viewpoint stresses the importance of building an understanding, and not jumping to conclusions or judgments.

Although many disciplines are involved in each side of the conversation, there seems to be relatively strong backlash against how the archaeological community, overall, responds to cult archaeology. The main criticism is that, “in general, the archaeological reaction to folk archaeology has abandoned the anthropological tradition, which instead of denouncing folk beliefs seeks to understand both the cultural context from which they emerge and the cultural needs to which they respond.”<sup>41</sup> Critics of archaeology claim that archaeologists have appointed themselves “social guardians,” and react as a “special state police force dedicated to eradicating interpretations that are considered false or inappropriate by a self-selected jury.”<sup>42</sup> Some even go so far as to claim that such reactions to folk beliefs harm the public perception of archaeology, because they appear elitist and judgmental. For example, Cornelius Holtorf states:

In my view, this is an example of opinionated and patronizing popular science writing that is damaging archaeology’s constituency in science. Readers are addressed by dismissive rhetoric and seemingly arbitrary value judgements reflecting personal preferences. What exactly is a ‘distortion’ of archaeological interpretation or ‘bogus archaeology’, as opposed to one based on the ‘proper’ study of archaeological remains? Which criteria are to be applied to judge TV archaeology? On what authority is anybody entitled to divide up their fellow citizens into categories such as ‘charlatans’ and ‘misdirected hobbyists’? Surely such judgements, as they are socially negotiable and subject to change over time, tell us more about the person making them than about the people addressed or should I say insulted.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Holtorf, 549.

<sup>41</sup> Michael G. Michlovic, “Folk Archaeology in Anthropological Perspective,” *Current Anthropology* 31, no. 1 (1990): 104.

<sup>42</sup> Michlovic, “On Archaeology,” 321.; Holtorf, 549.

<sup>43</sup> Holtorf, 545.

This view of archaeology's seeming elitism could certainly hurt its credibility among the public, especially if mainstream archaeologists are unable to make archaeology accessible and relevant to the average person. Critics of archaeology's attack on folk beliefs claim, "there are professional archaeologists who appear to resent the fact that some alternative archaeologists are particular good at telling such stories, whereas the professionals sometimes find it difficult to connect to larger audiences."<sup>44</sup> Holtorf continues on with this thought, stating, "if an 'unarchaeological' approach is more successful in producing what society hopes to gain from archaeology than 'archaeology itself', professional archaeologists have reason to be very worried."<sup>45</sup> This disconnect between the public and the scientific community does cause contention between established archaeology and cult archaeologies, and perhaps it is pseudoarchaeology's ability to appeal directly to the public that threatens the archaeological community most directly.

The criticism of the archaeological community's view on folk beliefs goes one step further by claiming that harshly confronting pseudoarchaeology is politically useful for mainstream archaeology, which is why archaeologists take such a strong stance against cult archaeologies. Cornelius Holtorf, an archaeologist himself, speaks out against his colleagues by claiming:

The archaeological community defines itself not only in terms of what it is but also in terms of what it is not. Folk believers have become useful foils in a debate about the nature of archaeology, truth about the past, and broader political issues such as the proper education of our children and the integrity of the Constitution. By portraying folk archaeologists as ignorant, self-serving, and dangerous, the professional implies that

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 547.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 545.

authentic archaeology is informed, selfless, and helpful – that without it we would fall victim to distortions.<sup>46</sup>

In essence, critics argue that vilifying pseudoarchaeology serves to put mainstream archaeology into a positive light by providing stark contrast. The motives of the field are called into question when archaeologists proclaim alternative archaeologies to be, at their very core, racist and dangerous to society. While the critics do not argue that pseudo-archaeologies are unflawed, it is mainly the vehemence with which it is attacked that is called into question. Michael Michlovic comments that,

I do not dispute that racism exists and that some folk believers may be racist, but this does not constitute an adequate analysis of the origins, popularity, or persistence of folk beliefs. A correlation between folk beliefs and racist attitudes is a fact in need of explanation. To compare ‘their’ racism/irrationality/ignorance with ‘our’ scientific, authoritative expertise is, of course, politically useful and for that very reason both predictable in a professionalized discipline seeking status in a hierarchy of competing interests and clearly deserving of scrutiny.<sup>47</sup>

While some members of the scholarly community clearly disagree with how archaeologists view the subject of pseudoarchaeology, the field of archaeology itself has remained relatively stable in maintaining their views against folk archaeology.

Despite the amount of criticism the archaeological community has received about their harsh stance on cult archaeology, they stick very strongly to their belief in science. While their critics accuse archaeologists of being threatened by the fact that alternative archaeologies often accrue a larger and more faithful audience than traditional archaeology, members of the archaeological community believe firmly that the popularity of a belief is not what is important. Kenneth Feder sums up this viewpoint quite clearly in his book *Frauds, Myths and Mysteries*, while during his discussion of the Ancient Astronaut Theory he states:

---

<sup>46</sup> Michlovic, “Folk Archaeology,” 104

<sup>47</sup> Michlovic, “On Archaeology,” 322.

Clearly, von Däniken's writings have been quite popular and have had an effect on millions of people... The popularity of his books or of his ideas, however, is wholly irrelevant. Science is not a democratic process. Knowledge depends on the procedures ... not on the popularity of the ideas behind that knowledge.<sup>48</sup>

This is a noteworthy contrast to the more anthropological perspective described earlier in this paper, where how the public views a theory is one of the most important elements of its analysis. Feder's view, however, discounts public perception in favor of an entirely scientific view of knowledge. Although criticized for making value judgments about the specific beliefs held by individual folk archaeologies, scholars who are critical of pseudoarchaeology firmly believe that revealing the deceptive nature of the arguments is important and does not work against their attempts to understand it. In the article "On Folk Archaeology in Anthropological Perspective," sociologist Francis B. Harrold and anthropologist Raymond A. Eve assert that,

We think that adopting a completely relativist position with regard to one's own society is neither possible nor desirable. We value archaeology's hard-won knowledge of the past, believe that it can add a valuable perspective to the education of any thinking person, and are concerned that many people (including some of our students) accept fanciful beliefs without regard for their lack of intellectual warrant. If we value integrity of our professional work, some boundaries are worth demarcating. Presumably, cultural anthropologists who encounter beliefs that non-Western peoples are "savages" in need of being civilized" can be forgiven the urge to engage in boundary demarcation, as can social scientists facing folk beliefs among American whites that depict blacks as inherently inclined towards laziness and crime. Beliefs like this have deep cultural roots and serve identifiable cultural functions. Should social scientists therefor avoid pointing out the falsity? We see no contradiction between working as social scientists to understand cult archaeology and working as educators to show how it is fallacious.<sup>49</sup>

According to this view, pseudoarchaeology should not be uncritically assessed simply because anthropologists see it as a cultural phenomenon. While it is certainly important to understand that not everyone views reality the same way, critics of cult archaeology believe that it is still

---

<sup>48</sup> Kenneth L. Feder, *Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries: Science and Pseudoscience in Archaeology*, Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1990, 156.

<sup>49</sup> John R. Cole, Kenneth L. Feder, Francis B. Harrold, Raymond A. Eve, and Alice B. Kehoe, "On Folk Archaeology in Anthropological Perspective," *Current Anthropology* 31, no. 4 (1990): 392

important to address the fallacies inherent in these ideologies, simply because it does reflect upon and within society.<sup>50</sup>

Even the debate of whether to directly address pseudo-archaeologies is laden with contention and differing opinions. One view suggests that “critical understanding and dialogue, not dismissive polemics,<sup>51</sup> is the appropriate way to engage with the multiple pasts and alternative archaeologies in contemporary society.”<sup>52</sup> Proponents of this technique, such as Holtorf, encourage discussion and debate in hopes of developing great understandings and peaceful interactions between mainstream science and fringe pseudoscience.<sup>53</sup> In contrast to this view, some in the scholarly community believe that attempting to create dialogue is neither constructive nor possible. Garret Fagan and Kenneth Feder suggest that, “the basic point is that you cannot reason with unreason. It is about as likely that archaeologists and pseudoarchaeologists can engage in ‘critical understanding and dialogue’ as it is that astronomers and astrologers can.”<sup>54</sup> This view is based on the premise that since pseudoarchaeology is not based on empirical science, scientific reasoning will have no effect in swaying it. Subscribers to this view conclude that, “no amount of countervailing evidence can change such a conclusion which, in reality, is an article of faith adhered to with quasi-religious fervor,” and therefore

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a polemic is defined as “an aggressive attack on or refutation of the opinions or principles of another.” *Merriam-Webster.com*, s.v. “Polemic,” <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/polemic>>.

<sup>52</sup> Holtorf, 550.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Fagan and Feder, 721.



attempts to do so are a waste of time and resources.<sup>55</sup> Clearly the discussion regarding alternative archaeologies is not black and white and as of yet there are is no definitive consensus.

Although the views presented here come from a small percentage of scholars, it is clear that the debate over the treatment of cult archaeology is a hot button issue in the scientific community. However, despite their differing opinions on how cult archaeology should be treated, scholars appear to be in agreement that the premises of these ideologies are not scientific and, because they lack empirical evidence, should not be considered “truth” (at least in the conventional sense). Why then does the Ancient Astronaut Theory, as well as other pseudo-archaeologies, gain such popularity in with the public? The answer may lie in cult archaeology’s innate appeal to faith, its position as a belief system and how it functions amongst those who accept it.

Firstly, a “belief system” is defined as “faith based on a series of beliefs but not formalized into a religion; also, a fixed coherent set of beliefs prevalent in a community or society.”<sup>56</sup> The Ancient Astronaut Theory itself is an atheistic (“one who believes there is no deity”<sup>57</sup>) or secular (“of or relating to the worldly of temporal”<sup>58</sup>) belief system because it does not have a supernatural aspect. While it is not a belief system based purely on earthly sources, the extraterrestrials are believed to be flesh and blood and not spiritual. These “ancient aliens” replace the creator god, and while they essentially take that role there is nothing mystical about them. Followers of the Ancient Astronaut Theory believe that what would have been perceived as a miracle or magic would have simply been the result of more advanced

---

<sup>55</sup> Fagan and Feder, 724.

<sup>56</sup> *Dictionary.com*, s.v. “Belief System,” <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/belief+system>.>

<sup>57</sup> *Merriam-Webster.com*, s.v. “Atheist,” <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/atheist>.>

<sup>58</sup> *Merriam-Webster.com*, s.v. “Secular,” <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/secular>.>

technology. As a belief system the Ancient Astronaut Theory provides a history that may be otherwise unavailable or confusing to the general public. There is much that is unknown about human history and development, and the Ancient Astronaut Theory takes advantage of these gaps to offer forth an all-encompassing explanation that specifically targets the general public.

The Ancient Astronaut Theory does function as a belief system, but it goes one step further and also functions much like a cult, as its categorization of “cult archaeology” may suggest. A cult is simply “a group or sect bound together by veneration of the same thing, person, ideal, etc.,” although the word cult generally has a negative connotation, due to the infamy of such cults as the Manson Family and Jonestown.<sup>59</sup> While cults themselves may not necessarily be religious, they do generally occur on the fringes of society, outside the accepted and mainstream belief systems. There are three separate models of cult formation that include: psychopathology model, entrepreneur model, and the subculture-evolution model.<sup>60</sup> Of these three models, the Ancient Astronaut Theory fits most closely within the parameters of the “entrepreneur model.” In this model there are three distinct levels of cults, progressing in that order from weakest to strongest compensators: audience cults, client cults, and cult movements. The most distinct differences of these three levels are their compensators, in which “audience cults provide *mythology*; client cults add serious *magic*; cult movements give complete *religion*.”<sup>61</sup> The Ancient Astronaut Theory in itself exemplifies the mildest form of entrepreneur cult, audience cult, which “offer[s] very specific and weak compensators, often no more than a mild, vicarious thrill or entertainment, and they lack both long-term clients and formal

---

<sup>59</sup> *Dictionary.com*, s.v. “Cult,” <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/cult>>

<sup>60</sup> Rodney Stark and William S. Bainbridge., “Cult Formation: Three Compatible Models,” *Sociological Analysis* 40, no. 4 (1979): 283-295.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 289.

membership.”<sup>62</sup> Therefore, the Ancient Astronaut Theory functions as a cult but mainly provides mythology on which other organizations can be built.<sup>63</sup>

While the Ancient Astronaut Theory may function as a cult, “not all cults are religions.”<sup>64</sup>

There are eight fundamental elements of religion which include:

1. Belief System or Worldview: Many beliefs that fit together in a system to make sense of the universe and our place in it.
2. Community: The belief system is shared, and its ideals are practiced by a group.
3. Central Stories or Myths: Stories that help explain the beliefs of a group; these are told over and over again and sometimes performed by members of the group. They may or may not be factual.
4. Rituals: Beliefs are explained, taught, and made real through ceremonies.
5. Ethics: Rules about how to behave; these rules are often thought to have come from a deity or supernatural place, but they might also be seen as guidelines created by the group over time.
6. Characteristic Emotional Experiences: Most religions share emotions such as awe, mystery, guilt, joy, devotion, conversion, inner peace, etc.
7. Material Expression: Religions use things to perform rituals or to express or represent beliefs, such as: statues, paintings, music, flowers, incense, clothes, architecture, and specific sacred locations.
8. Sacredness: Religions see some things as sacred and some not sacred (or profane). Some objects, actions, people and places may share in the sacredness or express it.<sup>65</sup>

These eight elements give an excellent guideline with which to examine the phenomenon surrounding the Ancient Astronaut Theory, in order to see if it fits within the parameters of a religion.

This capstone has already established that the Ancient Astronaut Theory serves as a belief system, and therefore qualification number one, as stated above, is fulfilled. The next

---

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 288.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 287-291.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 284.

<sup>65</sup> College of the Holy Cross, “Eight Elements of Religion,” <[http://college.holycross.edu/projects/himalayan\\_cultures/2011\\_plans/sshmitt/images/Elements.pdf](http://college.holycross.edu/projects/himalayan_cultures/2011_plans/sshmitt/images/Elements.pdf)>.

requirement, community, is more difficult to establish due to the fact that there has been no dedicated study of the popularity of the Ancient Astronaut Theory. However, there is evidence to suggest that the theory itself holds quite a large audience. One specific piece of evidence is the overwhelming popularity of von Däniken’s books, as he has sold over 63 million copies worldwide.<sup>66</sup> Another way to judge the Ancient Astronaut Theory’s popularity is by the ratings of the History Channel documentary *Ancient Aliens*, which devotes itself to explaining the Ancient Astronaut Theory. The table below shows ratings for eight separate airings of *Ancient Aliens*, six of which are the premier airing for the episodes:

<i>Ancient Aliens</i> Ratings <sup>67</sup>		
Air Date	Episode (season, episode)	Number of Viewers
October 28, 2010	“Mysterious Places” (2,1)	1.676 million
November 11, 2010	“Underwater Worlds” (2,3)	1.226 million
November 18, 2010	“Underground Aliens” (2,4)	1.535 million
November 29, 2010	Unknown rerun	1.597 million
December 2, 2010	“Alien Tech” (2,6)	1.705 million
December 9, 2010	“Angels and Aliens” (2,7)	1.124 million
December 16, 2010	“Unexplained Structures” (2,8)	2.034 million
January 27, 2011	Unknown rerun	1.309 million

Not every rating for *Ancient Aliens*, which is currently on its third season, has been reported and made public. However, from this data we can calculate that there are approximately 1.526

<sup>66</sup> <<http://www.daniken.com/e/index.html>>.

<sup>67</sup> Bill Gorman, “Thursday Cable Ratings: ‘Project Runway’ Finale...,” *TV by the Numbers*, October 29, 2010, <<http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2010/10/29>>; Bill Gorman, “Thursday Cable Ratings: ‘Burn Notice’ Premiere...,” *TV by the Numbers*, November 12, 2010, <<http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2010/11/12>>; Robert Seidman, “Thursday Cable Ratings: Bears Dolphins Wins...,” *TV by the Numbers*, November 19, 2010, <<http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2010/11/19>>; Bill Gorman, “Thursday Cable Ratings: Jets-Bengals Scores...,” *TV by the Numbers*, November 30, 2010, <<http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2010/11/30>>; Bill Gorman, “Thursday Cable Ratings: Heat/Cavaliers Tops Eagles/Texans...,” *TV by the Numbers*, December 3, 2010, <<http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2010/12/03>>; Bill Gorman, “Thursday Cable Ratings: Colts/Titans Tops...,” *TV by the Numbers*, December 10, 2010, <<http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2010/12/10>>; Robert Seidman, “Thursday Cable Ratings: 49ers/Chargers Tops...,” *TV by the Numbers*, December 17, 2010, <<http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2010/12/17>>; Robert Seidman, “Wednesday Cable Ratings: ‘Storage Wars,’...,” *TV by the Numbers*, January 27, 2011, <<http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2011/01/27>>; “Ancient Aliens: Episode Guide,” History.com, <<http://www.history.com/shows/ancient-aliens/episodes/>>.

million viewers per episode, which is more than the combined 2011 population of Wyoming (pop. 568,158) and Montana (pop. 998,199).<sup>68</sup> While these numbers are surely not representative of how many people are fervent believers, it does provide an idea of how many people are fascinated by the Ancient Astronaut Theory, and, at the very least, regard it with bemused skepticism. Clearly there is a community associated with this belief, and Durkheim states, “where a strong conviction is held by the same community of men, it inevitably takes on a religious character.”<sup>69</sup> Therefore the Ancient Astronaut Theory certainly stands up thus far to the distinct categories of religion.

The next essential element of religion is mythology. Earlier this paper discussed that the Ancient Astronaut Theory functioned as an “audience cult” which provides mythology.<sup>70</sup> This mythology is the basis of the cult, and is sold to the public as scientific fact. The incredible success of this modern mythology can, in part, be explained by taking elements of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s “structuralism,” which “focuses upon the relations between elements rather than upon the elements themselves,” and applying it to the Ancient Astronaut Theory.<sup>71</sup> Lévi-Strauss discusses that “mythological thought is created by rearranging old concepts into new structural arrangements” and is focused on the resolution of three basic universal oppositions:

---

<sup>68</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, “State & County Quickfacts: Wyoming,” under “Population, 2011 estimate,” <<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/56000.html>>; U.S. Bureau of the Census, “State & County Quickfacts: Montana,” under “Population, 2011 estimate,” <<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/30000.html>>

<sup>69</sup> Ernest Wallwork, “Durkheim’s Early Sociology of Religion,” *Sociological Analysis* 46, no. 3 (1985): 202

<sup>70</sup> Stark and Bainbridge, “Cult Formation,” 283-295.

<sup>71</sup> Michael Carroll, “The Savage Bind: Lévi-Strauss’ Myth Analysis and Anglophone Social Science,” *The Pacific Sociological Review* 21, no. 4 (1978): 468.

NATURE/CULTURE, LIFE/DEATH, and HIGH/LOW.<sup>72</sup> Michael Carroll argues that the Ancient Astronaut Theory combines the modern science fiction theme of extraterrestrial visitation with the common mythological theme of interbreeding between humans and “gods-from-the-sky.”<sup>73</sup> This reformation of two popular themes combines to create a new yet familiar mythology, which in turn helps to resolved the oppositions of NATURE/CULTURE and HIGH/LOW. Carroll states that,

Since the proponents of the ancient astronaut myth trace the origins of all the great historic civilizations to the practices and inventions transmitted by these visitors from space, it is clear that --- like the Atlantis Myth --- this myth also provides a solution to the NATURE/CULTURE dilemma. Simply put, “culture” arose from a state of “barbarism” because culture was literally given to the savages previously existing upon the earth by the members of a superior non-earthly civilization.<sup>74</sup>

Along with the NATURE/CULTURE opposition, the Ancient Astronaut Theory also resolves the HIGH/LOW opposition. This is due to its motif of extraterrestrial males (HIGH) mating with earth females (LOW) and in the process creating a new middle species. Carroll states that, “clearly any myth involving ‘gods-from-the-sky’ motif (regardless of whether or not the gods are identified as astronauts) provides a cognitive structure for mediating the opposition between HIGH and LOW.”<sup>75</sup> The resolution of these oppositions may make this myth attractive to people who have a low tolerance for “cognitive dissonance,”<sup>76</sup> since it “reduces the psychological

---

<sup>72</sup> Michael Carroll, “Of Atlantis and Ancient Astronauts: A Structural Study of Two Modern Myths,” *Journal of Popular Culture*: 546.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 547.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Cognitive dissonance is the “anxiety that results from simultaneously holding contradictory or otherwise incompatible attitudes, beliefs, or the like.”; *Dictionary.com*, s.v. “Cognitive Dissonance,” <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/cognitive+dissonance>>.

discomfort associated with dissonance.”<sup>77</sup> The Ancient Astronaut Theory itself is the mythology around which the belief system and “cult” are formed, and therefore is available to be used in the form of religion.

From here we begin to see less indication that the Ancient Astronaut Theory functions as a religion. While we do have the existence of a belief system, community and mythology (which together form the basis for the creation of any religious organization or cult), we do not have any of the following traits: rituals, ethics, characteristic emotional experiences, material expression, or sacredness, which are all smaller, more institutionalized parts of any religion. However, some of these traits, such as rituals and ethics, are essential to Durkheim’s theory of religion.

Durkheim believed that,

Religion’s chief contribution to social equilibrium lies in its prescriptive function. In prescribing how people ought to believe and to act, religion guides them to behave harmoniously or, at least, with fewer misunderstandings and conflicts. In exercising this ‘regulative influence on society,’ religion functions analogously to morality and law, which also counter intra-societal antagonisms resulting from self-interested actions<sup>78</sup>

Without this “prescriptive function” belief systems do not fulfill the main purpose of religions, and therefore cannot truly be considered as such. The Ancient Astronaut Theory does not mandate behaviors or provide ethics by which to live. It simply offers an alternative history and community that people can subscribe to.

It is important to remember that the Ancient Astronaut Theory did not emerge in a vacuum. Durkheim states, “history teaches us that religions have evolved and changed with the very societies, which gave birth to them.”<sup>79</sup> In a society that is shifting more towards scientific

---

<sup>77</sup> Carroll, “Of Atlantis,” 548.

<sup>78</sup> Wallwork, 206.

<sup>79</sup> Ernest Wallwork, “Durkheim’s Early...”: 204

reasoning, it is not shocking that the public would latch onto a belief system that portrays itself as science. While the Ancient Astronaut Theory functions more like a cult than a full religion, all mainstream religions were cults first. Rodney Stark and William S. Bainbridge state, in their book *The Future of Religion*,

In the beginning, all religions are obscure, tiny, deviant cult movements. Caught at the right moment, Jesus would have been found leading a handful of ragtag followers in a remote corner of the mighty Roman Empire. How laughable it would have seemed to Roman intellectuals that this obscure cult could pose a threat to the great pagan temples. In similar fashion, Western intellectuals scorn contemporary cults. Yet, if major new faiths are aborning, they will not be found by consulting the directory of the National Council of Churches. Rather, they will be found in lists of obscure cult movements. Thus, to assess the future of religion, one must always pay close attention to the fringes of religious economies.<sup>80</sup>

Today's fringe beliefs may be the future of established theology, and this fluidity gives scholars an excellent opportunity to address shifting values and implement a more empirically scientific worldview. However, in order to do so alternative archaeologies and histories cannot be disregarded or ignored.

The archaeological community also must shift the way it communicates with the public if it hopes to gain the popularity that cult archaeologies enjoy. Since folk archaeologies often originate and are sold directly to the public, Cornelius Holtorf states that, "the only true remedy for professional archaeologists is to try harder at practicing a socially and culturally meaningful archaeology themselves."<sup>81</sup> This does not require sacrificing the scientific method, but rather necessitates a shift in who the archaeological community targets with their information. Instead of publishing solely amongst peers, making archaeological achievement more accessible to the general public could assist in addressing fallacious alternative histories while they are still in

---

<sup>80</sup> Rodney Stark and William S. Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation*, London: University of California Press, 1985: 2.

<sup>81</sup> Holtorf, 548.



their infancy. The scientific community has every opportunity to connect and address the public, and if they can do so successfully the future of society could be rooted in the scientific method.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

“Ancient Aliens: Episode Guide,” History.com, <<http://www.history.com/shows/ancient-aliens/episodes/>> (accessed April 18, 2012).

Ancient Astronaut Society. Program. Fifth world conference. Chicago, IL, July 27-29, 1978.

“Apollo 11 Mission Summary.” *The Apollo Program*. Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum. <<http://www.nasm.si.edu/collections/imagery/apollo/as11/a11sum.htm>> (accessed April 5, 2012).

“Bibliography.” *Welcome to the World of Mysteries of Erich von Däniken*. <<http://www.daniken.com/e/bibliography.shtml>> (accessed April 5, 2012).

Däniken, Erich von. *Chariots of the Gods?: Memories of the Future – Unsolved mysteries of the Past*. New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1970.

“The Evidence.” *Ancient Aliens*. April 20, 2010.

Gorman, Bill. “Thursday Cable Ratings: ‘Burn Notice’ Premiere; It’s Always Sunny, Real Housewives, Heat/Celtics, Ravens/Falcons & More.” *TV by the Numbers*. November 12, 2010. <<http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2010/11/12/>> (accessed April 18, 2012).

Gorman, Bill. “Thursday Cable Ratings: Heat/Cavaliers Tops Eagles/Texans; Plus ‘Burn Notice,’ ‘Always Sunny,’ ‘Real Housewives’ & More.” *TV by the Numbers*. December 3, 2012. <<http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2010/12/03/>> (accessed April 18, 2012).

Gorman, Bill. “Thursday Cable Ratings: Jets-Bengals Scores; ‘Punkin Chunkin’ Tosses High.” *TV by the Numbers*. November 30, 2010. <<http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2010/11/30/>> (accessed April 18, 2012).

Gorman, Bill. “Thursday Cable Ratings: ‘Project Runway’ Finale Up; ‘Jersey Shore’ Reunion; ‘Sunny,’ ‘The League,’ ‘First 48’ & Much More.” *TV by the Numbers*. October 29, 2010. <<http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2010/10/29/>> (accessed April 18, 2012).

Gorman, Bill. “Thursday Cable Ratings: Colts/Titans Tops; ‘Burn Notice’ Rebounds; ‘Real Housewives,’ ‘Always Sunny’ & More.” *TV by the Numbers*. December 10, 2010. <<http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2010/12/10/>> (accessed April 18, 2012).

“Home.” *Welcome to the World of Mysteries of Erich von Däniken*. <<http://www.daniken.com/e/index.html>> (accessed April 5, 2012).

Lee, Luaine. "Star Trek turns 40." *The Mercury News* (San Jose, CA), August 18, 2006.  
<<http://web.archive.org/web/20060901115942/http://www.mercurynews.com/mld/mercurynews/entertainment/15305203.htm>> (accessed April 5, 2012).

"The Mission." *Ancient Aliens*. May 4, 2010.

Seidman, Robert. "Thursday Cable Ratings: Bears Dolphins Wins Night; 'Burn Notice' Slips; It's Always Sunny, Real Housewives & More." *TV by the Numbers*. November 19, 2010.  
<<http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2010/11/19/>> (accessed April 18, 2012).

Seidman, Robert. "Thursday Cable Ratings: 49ers/Chargers Tops; 'Burn Notice Goes Out on High Note; 'Real Housewives,' 'Always Sunny' & More." *TV by the Numbers*. December 17, 2010. <<http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2010/12/17/>> (accessed April 18, 2012).

Seidman, Robert. "Wednesday Cable Ratings: 'Storage Wars,' 'Dog the Bounty Hunter' Top Cable; 'Hot in Cleveland' Sheds A Chunk of Viewers." *TV by the Numbers*. January 27, 2011. <<http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2011/01/27/>> (accessed April 18, 2012).

U.S. Bureau of the Census. "State & County Quickfacts: Montana."  
<<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/30000.html>> (accessed April 26, 2012).

U.S. Bureau of the Census. "State & County Quickfacts: Wyoming."  
<<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/56000.html>> (accessed April 26, 2012).

"The Visitors." *Ancient Aliens*. April 27, 2010.

### Secondary Sources

"Ancient Aliens." History.com. <<http://www.history.com/shows/ancient-aliens>> (accessed April 5, 2012).

"Apollo 11." History.com. <<http://www.history.com/topics/apollo-11>> (accessed April 5, 2012).

Brodie, Richard. *Level 3 of Consciousness*. <<http://www.memecentral.com/level3.htm>> (accessed April 13, 2012).

Carroll, Michael. "Of Atlantis and Ancient Astronauts: A Structural Study of Two Modern Myths." *Journal of Popular Culture*: 541-550.

Carroll, Michael. "The Savage Bind: Lévi-Strauss' Myth Analysis and Anglophone Social Science." *The Pacific Sociological Review* 21, no. 4 (1978): 467-486.

Cole, John R. "Cult Archaeology and Unscientific Method and Theory." *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory* 3, (1980): 1-33.

- Cole, John R., Kenneth L. Feder, Francis B. Harrold, Raymond A. Eve, and Alice B. Kehoe. "On Folk Archaeology in Anthropological Perspective." *Current Anthropology* 31, no. 4 (1990): 390-394
- College of the Holy Cross. "Eight Elements of Religion." [http://college.holycross.edu/projects/himalayan\\_cultures/2011\\_plans/sshmitt/images/Elements.pdf](http://college.holycross.edu/projects/himalayan_cultures/2011_plans/sshmitt/images/Elements.pdf) (accessed April 26, 2012).
- Crick, Francis and Leslie Orgel. "Directed Panspermia." *Icarus* 19 (1973): 341-346.
- Dick, Steven J. "Why We Explore: The Birth of NASA." *Beyond Earth*. NASA. <[http://www.nasa.gov/exploration/whyweexplore/Why\\_We\\_29.html](http://www.nasa.gov/exploration/whyweexplore/Why_We_29.html)> (accessed April 5, 2012).
- Dictionary.com*. s.v. "Belief System." <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/belief+system>> (accessed April 26, 2012).
- Dictionary.com*. s.v. "Cognitive Dissonance." <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/cognitive+dissonance>> (accessed April 27, 2012).
- Dictionary.com*. s.v. "Cult." <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/cult>> (accessed April 26, 2012).
- Epstein, Stephen M. "Scholars Will Call It Nonsense: The Structure of Erich von Däniken's Argument." *Expedition* 29, no. 2 (1987): 12-18.
- Fagan, Garrat G., and Kenneth L. Feder. "Crusading against Straw Men: An Alternative View of Alternative Archaeologies: Response to Holtorf (2005)." *World Archaeology* 38, no. 4 (2006): 718-729.
- Feder, Kenneth L. *Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries: Science and Pseudoscience in Archaeology*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1990.
- Feder, Kenneth L. "Irrationality and Popular Archaeology." *American Antiquity* 49, no. 3 (1984): 525-541.
- Fischer, David H. *Historian's Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*. New York: Harper & Row, 1970.
- Fitzgerald, Randall. *The Complete Book of Extraterrestrial Encounters: The Ideas of Carl Sagan, Erich von Däniken, Billy Graham, Carl Sagan, John C. Lillu, John G. Fuller, and Many Others*. New York: Macmillian Publishing Co., 1979.
- Frazier, Kendrick. "Science and the Parascience Cults." *Science News* 109, no. 22 (1976): 346-350.

- Fritze, Ronald H. "On the Perils and Pleasures of Confronting Pseudohistory." *Historically Speaking* 10, no. 5 (2009): 2-5.
- Grim, Patrick, ed. *Philosophy of Science and the Occult*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990.
- Harrison, Albert A. "Thinking Intelligently About Extraterrestrial Intelligence: An Application of Living Systems Theory." *Behavioral Science* 38, (1993): 189-217.
- Harrold, Francis B., and Raymond A. Eve, ed. *Cult Archaeology and Creationism: Understanding Pseudoscientific Beliefs about the Past*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1987.
- Holtorf, Cornelius. "Beyond Crusades: How (Not) to Engage with Alternative Archaeologies." *World Archaeology* 37, no. 4 (2005): 544-551.
- Kelly, Benjamin. "Deviant Ancient Histories: Dan Brown, Erich von Däniken and the Sociology of Historical Polemic." *Rethinking History* 12, no. 3 (2008): 361-382.
- Lett, James. "Interpretive Anthropology, Metaphysics and the Paranormal." *Journal of Anthropological Research* 47, no. 3 (1991): 305-329.
- Lovata, Troy R. "Curious Archaeology: The Process of Assembling a Fringe Prehistory." *Public Archaeology* 4, no. 4 (2005): 266-275.
- Markovsky, Barry, and Shane R. Thye. "Social Influence on Paranormal Beliefs." *Sociological Perspectives* 44, no. 1 (2001): 21-44.
- Martin, Michael. "Pseudoscience, the Paranormal, and Science Education." *Science & Education* 3, (1994): 357-371.
- McKusick, Marshall. "Psychic Archaeology: Theory, Method, and Mythology." *Journal of Field Archeology* 9, no. 1 (1982): 99-118.
- Merriam-Webster.com*. s.v. "Atheist." <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/atheist>> (accessed April 27, 2012).
- Merriam-Webster.com*, s.v. "Polemic." <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/polemic>> (accessed April 25, 2012).
- Merriam-Webster.com*. s.v. "Secular." <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/secular>> (accessed April 27, 2012).
- Merriman, Nick. *Public Archaeology*. London: Routledge, 2004.

- Michlovic, Michael G. "On Archaeology and Folk Archaeology: A Reply." *Current Anthropology* 32, no. 3 (1991): 321-322.
- Michlovic, Michael G. "Folk Archaeology in Anthropological Perspective." *Current Anthropology* 31, no. 1 (1990): 103-107.
- "Moon Landing: 40 Years Later." *PBS Newshour Extra*. PBS Online. <[http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/video/blog/2009/07/moon\\_landing\\_40\\_years\\_later.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/video/blog/2009/07/moon_landing_40_years_later.html)> (accessed April 5, 2012).
- Partridge, Christopher, ed. *UFO Religions*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Pokotylo, David, and Neil Guppy. "Public Opinion and Archaeological Heritage: Views from Outside the Profession." *American Antiquity* 64, no. 3 (1999): 400-416.
- Pollom, Elizabeth. "A Timeline of Aliens in Science Fiction Literature." Depauw University. <<http://acad.depauw.edu/~aevans/UNIV197/WebPages/Fall2002/ChrisLizScott/webpages/inliterature.htm>> (accessed April 5, 2012).
- Prince, Andrew, and Gisela Telis. "Timeline: America's Space Program." NPR. <<http://www.npr.org/2011/01/26/4748778/timeline-americas-space-program>> (accessed April 5, 2012).
- "The Space Race." History.com. <<http://www.history.com/topics/space-race>> (accessed April 5, 2012).
- "Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope." IMDB. <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0076759/>> (accessed April 5, 2012).
- Stark, Rodney and William S. Bainbridge. *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation*. London: University of California Press, 1985.
- Stark, Rodney and William S. Bainbridge. "Cult Formation: Three Compatible Models." *Sociological Analysis* 40, no. 4 (1979): 283-295.
- Story, Ronald. *Guardians of the Universe?*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980.
- Thiering, Barry. *Some Trust in Chariots: Sixteen Views on Erich von Däniken's Chariots of the Gods?*. Great Britain: Bailey Brothers & Swinfen Ltd., 1973.
- Wallwork, Ernest. "Durkheim's Early Sociology of Religion." *Sociological Analysis* 46, no. 3 (1985): 201-217.