

UFOs and the Origins of Christianity

That all Cretans are liars is a proposition that isn't generally disputed except by Cretans themselves, who can take refuge in the paradox that if they simply admit to being Cretans, the first term of the syllogism has to be called into question. Yet we, who are not Cretans, recognize that there are whole classes of people who are egregious and inveterate liars and who make their living by it. Preeminently our president, but also, in the same spirit, the spokesman for Isuzu, flying saucer abductees, Egyptian Pharaohs reincarnated as actresses and professional astrologers, Oral Roberts and others whom the living God speaks to familiarly, Kurt Waldheim, Oliver North, and suchlike candidates for indictment. We understand that their position requires the lies they tell, and to the degree that their lies appear harmless or sanctified by the established decorums of National (and self) Interest or Religious Liberty, the media report their prevarications with no more than a knowing wink. It is understood that they are Cretans, but what the hell, we live in Crete.

In such a situation, jesting Pilate's poser "What is truth?" becomes, increasingly, an impropriety. When a club is called a spade, the man who wields it isn't a goon but an honest farmer, like James Jordan Denby, down there on the border of Nicaragua, whose putative connection to, and funding by, the CIA is deniable, by definition. In England these matters may not even be mentioned, thanks to that nation's superior command of Good Form and the police. And then there's France.

And so the paradigm of manly virtue, here in Crete, becomes not merely the raffish con man pulling one's leg, but the macho mobster breaking one's kneecap, who in his most paradigmatic moment, at the end of *The Godfather*, swears to his spouse that he is innocent of what she, and we, and every Cretan, knows is so. But she's married to the bastard, so what can she say except, "Darling, I believe you." And then revenge herself with an appropriate adultery. And who's the wiser? That's life, among the Cretans.

Though it's not in the OED, nor even in the big Random House dictionary dated 1967 (well after Eisenhower's U-2 embarrassment), "deniability" can be found in the 1962 *Roget's Thesaurus*, as the penultimate synonym in section 513.2, which begins with "doubtfulness" and concludes,

logically, with “disbelief.” Logically, because deniability almost always implies that what can be denied did nevertheless happen. Nixon was never such a fool as to suppose anyone thought he was innocent; deniability was all he asked. Capone was proud of his criminal empire and indignant when the Feds betrayed his trust in the social order by nailing him for the wimpy crime of tax evasion, and lately history has been repeating itself, comically, in the figure of John Gotti, who manifests an evangelic sense of personal righteousness and good tailoring that must be the envy of even such a washed-in-the-blood Tartuffe as Pat Robertson. Donald Manes died in a pool of tears shed in the solemn conviction that he was doing only what everyone did, what had to be done if the world was to keep turning on the axis he’d spent his whole life helping to grease. Doubtless, his widow, in the dark mansion financed by his malfesasances, still adds her tears to that pool.

Perhaps the most delectable (because silliest) instance of deniability in the annals of contemporary business-as-usual is Michael Deaver’s insistence that he is innocent of perjury because, thanks to his quart-a-day alcoholism, he can’t remember the crimes he committed. Waldheim must wish he’d thought of that one.

The assumption behind the concept of deniability is that the entire public realm is a criminal conspiracy, in which it is common knowledge that cops deal dope and the CIA sells ammo to those who will use it to scramble our own expendable eggs, without whose sacrifice history’s omelette could not be made, nor yet the profits that accrue to such transactions. Money rules: who’s so naive as not to know that?

But let us, a moment, restrict our view to the domestic plane. Here too deniability exerts a noticeable force. Rape is such a loaded question because it hinges, both ways, on the issue of deniability. Did Jennifer Levin consent to, or somehow provoke, the nice young man who, as it were, spasmodically, took her life? He says so, and she’s dead: deniability. Was Jessica Hahn the helpless victim of Jim Bakker’s lust, or was she, like Mary Magdalene before her, an experienced prostitute and, hence, fair game? Jim is strongly motivated to hope the latter is the case, for therein lies his hope of Adamic deniability: the woman tempted him. For similar reasons child molesters must take comfort in the incoherencies of those they have molested, and felons of all kinds, making the same calculation, prudently endeavor to murder the victims who might become their witnesses.

Lasting success in business, government, or organized crime depends, as every good team player will tell you, on cooperation. The police force’s blue wall of silence is only as strong as its crumbliest brick.

If every Watergate conspirator had had the team spirit of G. Gordon Liddy, children today might still have some respect for constituted authority. A semblance of ethical behavior can only be maintained in a society where there are material advantages for those who blow whistles and tell tales out of school. Sensibly, such behavior is ordinarily reprobated and punished by exile to the vast, invisible metropolis of Coventry. Those who want to belong learn early in life that they can do so only by keeping mum.

The moral imperative of keeping mum extends beyond the narrow confines of the Teamsters local and the quality-control task force of Morton Thiokol and encroaches on our smallest social interactions. Meeting Mormons socially, it is not *comme il faut* to inquire too closely into their honest opinion of the revelations Joseph Smith received from the Angel Moroni, nor is it considered polite to snicker at the pretensions of those who think there may be something in astrology. The realm of protected idiocies is as large as all Lilliput—and its boundaries are being continually extended.

I know this from recent personal experience. Earlier in 1987 I reviewed the first in a recent spate of books about UFO “abductions,” Whitley Strieber’s *Communion*, and suggested, on the basis of internal evidence in that book and an earlier work of fiction by Strieber, that his purported “nonfiction” book was a transparent hoax. Subsequently, it spent many weeks on the nonfiction side of the *Times* bestseller list, and received the kind of polite, not overtly skeptical attention that is accorded any piece of charlatantry that has earned money in the seven-digit range. The review written for the *Sunday Times Book Review* had its most deflating judgments deleted by editorial *force majeure*, and both *Publishers Weekly* and *Omni* have published articles that bent over backwards to accommodate the author’s second line of defense, which is that if he wasn’t literally abducted, he was having a Significant Spiritual Experience. That he might simply have been telling a whopper is a supposition that durst not be expressed, given the author’s gifts for litigious saber-rattling.

My own fascination with Strieber’s case and that of other copycat abduction claimants is due not just to the sheer scale of the chicanery but to my conviction that ufology constitutes an invaluable scale model of the origins of the Christian faith. The four gospels are based, like Strieber’s *Communion*, on the obdurate insistence of a small circle of witnesses that they saw what they saw. Since no one else was in the vicinity of the witnessed event who might contradict them, these witnesses are guaranteed deniability. This is not only a necessary precondition of any miraculous

witness but, implicitly, a template for the stage management of future miracles.

Contemporary fundamentalists claim to find the accounts of the resurrection persuasive as to the literal truth of the event witnessed, while those of more elastic faith tend to interpret the resurrection stories as shared visionary experiences. Similarly, Strieber offers two ways in which his UFO stories may be understood, as events that really did happen, and as mystical experiences somewhat on a par with receiving the stigmata. Neither Christians nor ufologists care to examine the likeliest possibility, that the mere collusion of many liars accounts for the congruence of one witness's testimony with another's. (Assuming such congruence exists; actually, there are versions of the UFO gospel that out-Strieber Strieber in their covert salaciousness.)

Indeed, a new religion's first concern, after its gospel has been proclaimed, is to secure the faithful against the scorn of skeptics. "Smite a scorner," advises the author of *Proverbs*, "and the simple will beware." And "Judgments are prepared for scorners, and stripes for the back of fools." Strieber is not yet so confident of his young faith as openly to brandish the knout, but he does sound this note of warning in the "Prelude" to *Communion*:

There has been a lot of scoffing directed at people who have been taken by the visitors. . . . Scoffing at them is as ugly as laughing at rape victims. We do not know what is happening to these people, but whatever it is, it causes them to react as if they have suffered a great personal trauma. And society turns away, led by vociferous professional debunkers whose secret fears apparently close their minds. . . . I suffered from this experience. Others suffered, and are still suffering. It is essential that effective support be developed to aid those who have it. The scoffing has to stop.

In practice it is not that difficult to engineer a social environment in which true believers can enjoy the illusion of their triumph over scoffers. Churches are built for precisely that purpose, and till there's enough money for a proper nave, one can rent a lecture hall. In the summer of '87, a panel of ufologists convened at American University in Washington, D.C., where Strieber had an opportunity to intimidate ufology's most persistent debunker, Philip Klass. "There is a gentleman here tonight," he is reported as saying (*Omni*, December 1987), "who has seen fit to call me a liar in public on a number of occasions: Mr. Philip Klass,

right here, in case anyone doesn't recognize him." After the audience booed and hissed Klass, Strieber read aloud from one of the sacred texts of his creed, a polygraph text in which he swore he was telling the truth, that he wasn't fibbing for dollars, and that the aliens really and truly had touched him. Strieber's enactment of these scenes of testimony and rebuke to unbelievers serve, like the perorations of a Jimmy Swaggart, both as entertainment and as a model of how the faithful are to confront a world of unbelievers.

For a certain kind of person such confrontations must be fun, especially if they lead to such a satisfying conclusion as that reported in *Omni*, where Klass denied having called Strieber a liar and offered to make a public apology if Strieber could produce a tape of the TV show in which the charge was made. I imagine that McCarthy, in his era, felt the thrill of the circus aerialist as he ascended to the heights of national fame on the tightwire of lies he walked each day before the media. And how much more amusing for Gary Stollman (another UFO evangelist) to have secured his moment before the TV cameras by intimidating the TV crew with a toy revolver.

Strieber's rewards, both financial and psychological, are clear enough, but what do lesser, Johnny-come-lately abductees stand to gain from accepting Strieber's standing invitation to add their UFO testimonials to his? They won't have bestsellers and movie sales; they won't be interviewed by prime talk-show hosts. They will, however, know the primal satisfaction of telling the same Big Lie without the strain of having to invent and promulgate it themselves. It is now, so to speak, in the public domain. Within the smaller public sphere of his or her own personal acquaintance, each self-proclaimed abductee can be a mini-celebrity, a person important enough to have been taken up by the living gods into the high-tech heaven of a genuine flying saucer.

A scam, even so? skeptics may urge. Assuredly, but why (these claimants may assuage the doubter within) should not they enjoy their moment in the spotlight of inauthenticity, along with the nation's official *dramatis personae*: Poindexter and North, Nixon and Reagan, Oral Roberts, Jim Bakker, and Pat Robertson, all proven and approved liars and all still officially respectable and accorded kid-glove treatment by the media. So might an early Christian have assuaged his or her doubts anent the resurrection of Christ and all latter-day saints, themselves especially included. Had not the emperors of Rome regularly proclaimed their own divinity? Had not Caligula testified to having had (much like Strieber) sexual congress with the moon-goddess? (Even at the Roman court, how-

ever, there were skeptics, though they recognized the need for diplomacy. Vitellius, when asked to corroborate Nero's claims, answered, "No, only you gods can see one another.") An ordinary citizen confronted with such imperial effrontery had few options more personally satisfying than to declare an equivalent demi-divinity: if not Godhead, at least co-immortality with the crucified and resurrected God. So much for the divine pretensions of Caligula, Jimmy Swaggart, Nero, Nixon, Heliogabalus, and their anointed successors.