

*Nova Religio*

typographical errors and stylistic inconsistencies or distracting idiosyncrasies. All bibliographic information is located solely in the footnotes of each self-contained essay; there is no volume-wide or volume-specific bibliography or index.

Despite these faults, these essays do indeed represent a sampling of the most up-to-date and cutting-edge research, albeit from a single perspective. They also represent some of the most serious attempts to justify psi phenomena in one place. If one wishes to know the contemporary conversation about the paranormal, these volumes are excellent places to start. Researchers and cultural critics can find many points of departure, but use in a classroom should be selective and judicious; not all the essays are equal in critical rigor.

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*The Reliability of UFO Witness Testimony*. Edited by V. J. Ballester-Olmos and Richard W. Heiden. Upiar Press, 2023. 711 pages. Free download through Academia.edu.

The existence of this book illustrates why UFOs have been so tantalizing to the general public, but also to academics and other researchers. (Many of those interested in the field now call them UAPs, for “unidentified anomalous phenomena,” recognizing that such things are sometimes seen in the water as well as the air.) As the editors note in the introduction, the writers—some fifty-six of them, contributing fifty-seven essays ranging from four to eighteen pages—span the disciplines. Some are academics, many are not. A plurality are trained in psychology or psychiatry, but many more have backgrounds in the hard sciences or history, education, anthropology, or sociology. A large number of contributors are from the United States, but some come from Europe, South America, and Asia as well.

The diversity of disciplines and regions here is appropriate for the subject. The UFO, precisely because it defies easy identification and categorization, blurs the lines between our categories of knowledge. Depending on where you stand, this may be because “UFO” is not a coherent category in the first place. But it might also be because UFOs, whether they be genuine otherworldly craft or simply a series of misidentifications, are genuinely beyond our categories of knowledge. They break out of science into religion; they are experienced psychologically or as technology; they force humans to grapple with the boundaries we invent.

The editors of this volume, V. J. Ballester-Olmos and Richard W. Heiden—both business professionals with backgrounds in science and UFO investigation—are convinced that UFOs are “psychosocial” in origin, that is, a social construction. This means that whatever strange

things people have been seeing in the sky, they have been conditioned (the editors say “overdosed”) by media to identify them as UFOs. These phenomena might be anything from misidentified birds to asteroids; the important thing is that they are not readily identifiable, creating thereby an alarming, perhaps extraterrestrial, perhaps interdimensional category with deep and profound meaning for humanity. The editors worry about the damage this construct does to our societies, along with the profound distraction and consequent suspicions it generates. They hope the volume offers a multidisciplinary refutation of the notion that eyewitness reports of UFO sightings are necessarily reliable. In fact, they say, they are not.

The editors have divided the contributions into six sections, although the first three constitute three-quarters of the total essays in the book—Case Studies, Psychological Perspectives, and On Witness Testimony. The remaining sections cover Empirical Research, Anthropological Approach, Metrics and Scaling, and Epistemological Issues. The Case Studies section includes evaluations of famous UFO cases, like the Cash–Landrum incident, in which the two eponymous witnesses encountered a strange craft that they believed left them with radiation burns; or Claude Vorilhon, whose encounter with a being from another world led him to choose the name “Raël” and found a new religious movement; and the famous Pascagoula abduction of Charles Hickson and Calvin Parker in 1973. These seventeen essays approach their subjects in different ways, but each argues, using a different methodology, that these witnesses are not simply transparent reporters of the phenomena they encounter, but rather creators of meaningful narratives. Susan J. Palmer, a scholar of new religious movements, claims that Vorilhon’s testimony bears the marks of many other belief systems, from the Bible to science fiction. The medical doctor Gary P. Posner contends that the wounds in the Cash–Landrum case were not caused by radiation.

The essays in this first section vary greatly in approach and content. The journalist Peter Huston, for instance, discusses his personal encounters with several claimed alien abductees. He observes that one of whom—the famous Betty Hill, who with her husband was the first American to claim abduction by a UFO—“contradicted herself in several ways and made statements that were clearly illogical and not believable” (65). His approach is anecdotal, based on personal experience and judgment. In contrast, immediately following Huston’s essay, the meteorologist Alexander G. Keul delves into technical and statistical analyses of the phenomenon of ball lightning, arguing that it is the ill-understood likely culprit behind a fair number of UFO encounters.

The sections on Psychological Perspectives and On Witness Testimony take a similar multidisciplinary approach. In the second section, psychologists and psychiatrists explain over and over that our minds are strange and fragile things. It is easy for trauma, hypnosis, and other

promptings to produce inaccurate memories. Our judgment and thought processes are far more influenced by our surroundings, peer groups, and the media than any of us really want to admit.

The section On Witness Testimony further develops that fact from the perspectives of scientists and humanities scholars. For instance, Luise White, the well-known scholar of African history and culture, explains that for many witnesses UFO encounters are quite relevant to modern social anxieties about the environment, war, and reproduction. Richard Noll, a historian of medicine, draws parallels between the alien abduction boom in the 1980s and the Satanic Panic occurring at the same time, in which many Americans were convinced by rumor and media coverage that Satanic cults were infiltrating neighborhoods and daycare centers. Noll and White, in different ways, both argue that stories of UFO encounters are deeply marked by the culture in which they occur. The final essays in this section bolster these claims with social scientific research, examining survey data and medical studies.

The essays throughout this lengthy volume range widely in style and method, but that is appropriate. UFOs do not appear to be any single thing, either. Despite its variance, its repetition, and its occasional unevenness, in its very structure this collection offers us a way of thinking about a consistently baffling phenomenon.

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## Publication Notes

*The OSHO Source BOOK: A Bio-Bibliography.* By Pierre Evald. Self-Published, 2014, 2019, with Supplement and Update 2024. <https://oshosourcebook.com/>.

Bhagwan Rajneesh (Chandra Mohan Jain, 1931–1990) used many names and titles throughout his controversial career. Osho was the final name the guru adopted after fleeing Rajneeshpuram, his Oregon city/ashram, in 1985 and being deported from the United States. While Rajneesh wrote very little, he loved to speak, giving a huge number of talks to his many followers. It seems that every word of every lecture was recorded, transcribed, and eventually published, collected in more than 500 pamphlets and books, in both English and Hindi. Thousands of audio and video recordings have been preserved by his neo-sannyasins (initiated followers) as well.

*The OSHO Source BOOK* (capitalization by its author/compiler/curator) is a sprawling internet archive of all things Rajneesh, organized into three “volumes,” each with many subdivisions. Its creator, Pierre Evald, is a long-term neo-sannyasin as well as a retired faculty member