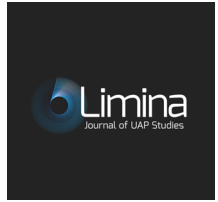




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Review: “Greg Eghigian. *After the Flying Saucers Came: A Global History of the UFO Phenomenon.*” New York: Oxford University Press, 2024. Xi+400 pp. Hardcover, \$29.99.

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For instance, Eghigian is frank that he lacks the technical expertise to make a scientific judgment about what UFOs might be. But, as a historian, he can point out that it’s interesting that so many people have assumed that science is the right way to answer the questions UFOs raise. He can, and in this book does, shed a great deal of light on what I think is an especially interesting problem: Given that these things are by definition unidentified, why have we humans chosen the tools we have—scientific, religious, psychological, governmental, among dozens of others—to try to identify them? And what do we do when those tools have—as they all have—inevitably failed to do so?

His subject then is less UFOs per se than the people who study and experience UFOs. This is a different approach than many other books on the topic take, but it’s common among scholars like myself or Eghigian or Jodi Dean or many others.

Greg Eghigian and I came to the study of UFOs for similar reasons. We’ve enjoyed some friendly interactions, and as I read his new *After the Flying Saucers Came: A Global History of the UFO Phenomenon*, I found myself nodding again and again. He is asking the sorts of questions that interest me. That shouldn’t be surprising because we’re both trained as historians, which means we’re interested in exploring the context and influences that might help us understand the causes and direction of particular events. The questions we ask about UFO have to do with what these things are in the cultural, rather than material, sense.

The standards of our trade rely on footnotes that direct our readers to sources they can go and look at themselves, and UFOs—as Eghigian paraphrases sociologist Arnaud Esquerre—are notable for their resistance to being gathered into archival drawers where they can be secured, to be taken out and held up to the light again and again. Scholars of religion, of which I am one, face the same problem when it comes to claims about angels and God.

But it’s also that very elusiveness that makes these things tantalizing and infuriating, and, frankly, so important to the modern world. UFOs show us where the limits of modernity are. Early on in the book Eghigian writes “Science, engineering, medicine, organized religion, professional expertise, universities, government, mass media: UFO devotees have never tired of disputing the authority and integrity of each.” (10) Over and over, people who

saw something strange in the sky—and people who had even more extreme encounters with things they could not explain—turned to such conventional authorities for help and explanation and found themselves disappointed.

Eghigian's global approach is one of the major strengths of the book, because in comparing differing countries and cultures we can see the same patterns happen again and again. He shows us how extensive the intellectual and institutional resources human beings have marshalled to confront the UFO have been; how many possibilities and options have been explored across the continents; and how frequently UFOs have prompted human beings to challenge conventional authority, whether it be in the hands of the state or academia or even other UFO believers as those authorities have failed to solve the problem.

It is significant that Eghigian begins the book with—as we might expect—the story of Kenneth Arnold and the strange discs he saw near Mount Ranier in the summer of 1947. It's even more significant that he then turns to a story much less well-known in the United States, the ghost rockets that plagued Sweden in those same years, resuscitating old Second World War fears and almost immediately throwing poor Swedes into consternation when their military could not promptly solve the problem. He then takes us back to the frustrated Arnold, who spent many years after his sighting trying to solve the problem of what he—and others like him—had actually seen. The challenge consumed Arnold.

And it's not till then that Eghigian flashes back into time, to strange lights the Romans saw and apparitions of the Virgin Mary. The order of these arguments is meaningful. Other histories of the UFO phenomenon begin with such stories, but that Eghigian puts them where he does, at the very moment when Americans and Europeans were searching for answers, shows something about how humans in the period thought. Reaching back to history, as UFO thinkers began to do in earnest in the 1960s, showed a group of people stymied by the failures of contemporary science and the military to solve such problems. So they went to different sources. Even to the occult and ancient past.

For instance, in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s the contactee George Adamski thumbed his nose at professional scientists, claiming that his own mystical encounters with extraterrestrial intelligence equipped him to warn the nation of the destructive potential of Cold War science. Adamski's story is well-known, but Eghigian points us to his less-known tremendous influence in Asia. He shows us how European UFO investigations were in many cases born

in that continent's esoteric traditions. Adamski's approach was popular in the United States, but it was increasingly shoved aside as the US military tried to wrangle the UFOs for its own concerns. And yet, neopaganism enjoyed a tremendous revival in Germany and Britain and Scandinavia after the Second World War, and many UFO investigators there saw the question of flying saucers as a fundamentally spiritual and even occult problem. In the United States figures like the writer Donald Keyhoe and even the dour figures of Projects Sign and Grudge and Blue Book tried to slap down the influence of the George Adamskis, insisting that UFOs were a scientific and military issue not to be besmirched by talk of dimensions and magic and fairies. Such battles were present, and if anything more bitter, in Europe.

Eghigian's comparative approach bears him much fruit, and on top of that, the second half of the book is perhaps the best blow by blow of the history of the American UFO scene since the work of David Jacobs and Curtis Peebles. Unlike Garrett Graff's recent (and exhaustive) book, Eghigian's cast ranges far beyond the so-called "official" world of American universities and government agencies and defense contractors; to Adamski and European occultists we might add Soviet cosmists, American premillennial evangelicals, and Brazilian farmers, all of whom claimed that their particular worldview was essential to determining what these strange things really were.

Of course, for many of these figures, the technologically-obsessed, militarily-paranoid world of the Cold War inspired similar readings of UFOs across the globe. There was worry they were emissaries of some state or other, or if extraterrestrial, equally dedicated to conquest or destruction. That was as true in Brazil as in Boston. But at the same time, the sheer diversity of the communities Eghigian visits shows us that UFOs are perhaps most powerful when they are least explained. Lights in the sky could be anything, and exploring how these varied interpreters struggled to resolve them allows Eghigian the opportunity to make sense of how humans make sense of the world.