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Diana W. Pasulka. *Encounters: Experiences with Nonhuman Intelligences*. New York: St. Martin's Essentials, 2023. 248 pp. ISBN: 781250879561. $27.00.

Dr. Diana Walsh Pasulka is a professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington. She initially specialized in Catholic history, publishing a study on purgatory, before shifting her focus more recently to the subject of unidentified flying objects ("UFOs" or "UAP"—unidentified anomalous phenomena). Her 2019 book *American Cosmic: UFOs, Religion, Technology* (Oxford University Press) stands out for several reasons. First, it is (unfortunately) still uncommon for a scholar with an established academic career to engage seriously with the study of UFOs. Second, the book was published by Oxford University Press, a highly regarded academic publisher, which lends credibility to her unconventional research.

In *American Cosmic*, Pasulka recounts an expedition with two scientists—referred to under pseudonyms—to a concealed site in New Mexico, where they discovered materials purportedly originating from a crashed extraterrestrial craft. While Pasulka refrains from endorsing a definitive position on the ontological reality of UFOs, she analyzes the phenomenon through the lens of religious studies. She interprets it as a new form of religion wherein technology assumes a sacred role. This is evidenced both in its function as a sacred object (e.g., alleged artifacts from UFO crashes) and as a sacred medium (e.g., UFOs as portals that allow humans to connect with superior or transcendent nonhuman intelligences). Despite her neutral stance, Pasulka's engagement with the subject suggests a conviction that there is a substantive phenomenon worthy of academic inquiry.

Encounters can be read as a sequel to *American Cosmic*; the two works form a single, cohesive narrative. *American Cosmic* presented remarkable observations and provocative claims, which skeptics might easily dismiss as contributing to the UFO conspiracy narrative it seeks to analyze. However, the credibility afforded by its

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publication through Oxford University Press lends the work an air of legitimacy and academic rigor. *Encounters* ventures into broader and "wilder" territory, exploring UFO-related and esoteric topics such as luminous orbs, weird dreams, precognition, encounters with angels and demons, and revelatory experiences or "downloads" (knowledge acquired from supranatural sources, sometimes after having followed "protocols" for a certain amount of time).

The central claim of the book seems to be that the experiences it documents indicate a deep connection between the UFO phenomenon and esotericism. This is a highly interesting claim, but unfortunately the book falls short in terms of methodological rigor and critical analysis.

To begin with, Pasulka does not often make clear the connection between people's experiences and UFOs. Take for example her conversation with Dr. Iya Whiteley, a "space psychologist" who has studied the psychological experiences of astronauts. Whiteley contends that these experiences necessitate a new linguistic framework, one that in her view is also able to incorporate the UFO phenomenon, though in what way is not made explicit. Whiteley also subscribes to "panpsychism," the philosophical view that all entities in the environment—animals, plants, insects, and even the environment at large—possess some level of sentience and can potentially be communicated with. On the basis of this she developed a method that she believes enables babies from around six months old to synesthetically engage with what she terms an "Earth language." This is all very interesting, but what this has to do with UFOs remains unclear.

Something similar can be said for the chapter on "Moon Girl," the pseudonym for "Simone," an investor "in companies focused on AI, quantum computing, space, and decentralized technologies" (143). Simone discusses her experiences of receiving "downloads" (which she describes as intuitive ways of acquiring knowledge) or by using "protocols" (a phenomenon she claims to have experienced since childhood and developed further through engaging with Western esotericism). But what protocols? And again: how is this related to UFOs?

More interesting for scholars in esotericism are the experiences of a government

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scientist Pasulka refers to as "Gray Man." He reported an encounter with the angel St. Michael, which was followed by UFO sightings and vivid, unusual dreams. "Gray Man" interprets the UFO phenomenon through a framework of angels and demons. This chapter underscores a recurring theme: that "many people who see UFOs experience supernatural or unwanted paranormal events, such as time distortion, sleep paralysis, and a feeling that the entities they see are evil or divine" (98). But of course, this observation is not new, being well-known from the literature (for example, works by John Keel and Jacques Vallée). Pasulka clearly knows that, she just doesn't expound on it, which in my view is exactly what a scholar in religion should do.

The chapters on "Jose" tell the story of a former student of Pasulka who reported demonic (or are they alien?) encounters and claimed to have developed a "sixth sense" that aided his survival serving as a soldier in Afghanistan. Pasulka characterizes Jose as a mystic of esotericism who believes "that there are at least two networks—the organic network, or [Teilhard de] Chardin's Earth Soul, and the internet" (120). According to Pasulka, Jose instinctively knows how to connect with this Earth Soul, a capability she also attributes to Gray Man and Dr. Whiteley. She interprets this as an example of "spontaneous esotericism" displayed by such experiencers, but what exactly she means by "esotericism" in this context remains rather vague (123).

And then there is the account of Len Filppu, who, after witnessing a UFO with his teenage friends, reported a series of unusual experiences, including precognitive dreams. Filppu posits the existence of what he calls "The Knowing"—a phenomenon he connects to the concept of a transcendent, Platonic realm in which time and space are intertwined. He suggests that there are individuals, like himself, who appear to have access to this metaphysical dimension. Again, the reader is left craving for analytical depth that never comes.

In my view, a major challenge with *Encounters* is that it seems to lack the thematic focus that characterized *American Cosmic*. However one judges the academic merits of the earlier book (it is a topic of discussion), it clearly

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endeavored to interpret the UFO phenomenon through the lens of religious studies, framing it as a new religious movement. *Encounters*, by contrast, does not appear to clearly articulate its objectives nor does Pasulka define her target audience. As a result, the work feels far less coherent than its predecessor.

Encounters reads as a compilation of accounts of Pasulka's interactions with "experiencers." Notably, many of these experiencers are somehow connected to technology, with artificial intelligence frequently playing a significant role in their narratives. The exact nature of the connection is never made entirely clear, nor is the question of how this all ties up with the UFO phenomenon. Pasulka offers no definitive conclusions at the end of the book. However, she does state that: "One conclusion I've reached is that UFO encounters must be placed with contexts and not extracted from the lives of the people who encounter them" (198–99).

In other words, UFO encounters are far more complex and enigmatic than their portrayals in the popular media often suggest. These encounters frequently serve as catalysts for revelatory experiences and esoteric phenomena that are deeply intertwined with the lives of those who report them. This perspective implies that an overemphasis on the "nuts-and-bolts" aspects of UFOs—such as their physical or technological characteristics—may obscure the broader significance of the phenomenon. Pasulka hints that familiarity with religion, and particularly esoteric traditions, might offer a more insightful interpretive framework for understanding the experiences discussed in the book. This is highly interesting, and I tend to agree with her on this point. But again, the book itself does not offer examples of such an interpretive framework that would illustrate her point nor does it constructively give pointers toward developing such a framework.

Can *Encounters* be recommended as a scholarly or academic work? In my view, while authored by an academic scholar, the book lacks both focus and the structural and formal elements typically expected of scholarly publications. Most notably, it lacks a coherent theoretical framework for connecting UFO experiences and esotericism. Critical reviewers of *American Cosmic* (such as the theologian Ted

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Peters) have already noted the simplicity of its theoretical underpinnings and its superficial treatment of the term "religion." In *Encounters*, Pasulka adds to the already vague term "religion" not only by introducing equally undefined concepts such as "spirituality" and "esotericism," but also by a lack of rigorous analysis that elucidates the characteristics that make UFO-experiences spiritual or esoteric.

This book may perhaps be better understood as an exercise in popularization, targeting the growing audience of individuals intrigued by the UFO phenomenon. Moreover, Pasulka has been successful in monetizing the book, by organizing a range of paid online seminars and courses featuring several experiencers from the book, such as Whiteley and Filppu, as speakers. On social media, reactions to the book have been predominantly negative, with many readers expressing disappointment at the superficial treatment of the UFO topic, its lack of critical discussion, and its inclination towards advocating a vague, New Age spirituality. As this review shows, the present reviewer found the book a fascinating but ultimately frustrating read, and thus joins the choir.

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