

The pedagogy of *Ancient Aliens*

Why I teach ancient astronaut theory as part of Intro to Religion

by [Walter Staggs](#) in the [September 2023](#) issue



(Illustration by Eric Nyquist)

I admit, when I first encountered the ancient astronaut theory by way of the popular History Channel series *Ancient Aliens* about ten years ago, I laughed. The Intro to Religion student who recommended it to me seemed taken aback. “But it affects your field and our faith,” he said. I could tell by the look on his face that he was serious—and that he had questions.

Ancient Aliens, now in its 19th season, is based on the work of Swiss writer Erich von Däniken, whose book *Chariots of the Gods?*—published in the late 1960s at the apex

of the space race—is a cult classic. Von Däniken claims that “our forefathers received visits from the universe in the remote past . . . these ‘strangers’ annihilated part of mankind existing at the time and produced a new, perhaps the first, *homo sapiens*.”

Obviously, that’s an astounding claim, especially that last bit about aliens committing genocide. Von Däniken had grown tired of what he considered “inconsistencies” in archaeology and religion, like who created Stonehenge or the pyramids and why, anomalies that he thought could not be explained by the prevailing scientific theories of the day. He wanted “to introduce a new working hypothesis and place it at the very center of our research into the past.” That hypothesis includes the claim that deities of most religions, including Jesus, were actually extraterrestrials. This is what became known as the ancient astronaut theory.

When von Däniken published *Chariots of the Gods*, admitting you believed in UFOs and alien life-forms—much less suggesting extraterrestrial origins for Jesus and the Buddha—was to invite ridicule and condemnation from academic and religious communities alike. No peer-reviewed research has ever substantiated von Däniken’s claims. Ten years ago, when my student asked me what I thought about *Ancient Aliens*, public attitudes toward the show weren’t much better. On the Smithsonian’s blog in 2012, science writer Riley Black said that if her editors allowed her to swear, her “entire review would be little more than a string of expletives.”

We live in a fantastically different world now. The US government has admitted that UFOs exist, though they refer to them now as UAPs: unidentified anomalous (or aerial) phenomena, a shift in language that signals a new social legitimacy that conversations about potential alien life have never enjoyed. David Charles Grusch, a veteran of the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency and the National Reconnaissance Office, has alleged that the intelligence community is hiding classified evidence of “intact and partially intact craft of non-human origin,” according to Leslie Kean and Ralph Blumenthal of *The Debrief*. “For many decades,” they write, “the Air Force carried out a disinformation campaign to discredit reported sightings of unexplained objects. Now, with two public hearings and many classified briefings under its belt, Congress is pressing for answers.” Jonathan Grey, an officer in the US intelligence community who currently works for the National Air and Space Intelligence Center, told *The Debrief*: “The non-human intelligence phenomenon is real. We are not alone.”

This is a full-blown paradigm shift. As Sean Illing noted in *Vox*, “It’s a great time to believe in aliens.”

My student’s honest inquiry led me to begin seriously contemplating the potential the discovery of alien life has to challenge or disrupt the faith of religious people—and how this might affect mental health. Declining faith is already playing a role in the rise of what have become known as “deaths of despair,” Steve Goldstein reported in January. When my student wanted to talk about the possibility of alien life, what he really wanted to talk about was the meaning of human life. When my students take the ancient astronaut theory seriously, it is the equivalent of contemplating the meteor that took out the dinosaurs, but this meteor is pointed at everything they believe they know about what it means to be human. Where on earth do you start with something that alters everything?

I first dug into the ancient astronaut theory during the height of the pandemic, when I suddenly had more time on my hands to entertain conspiracy theories and *Ancient Aliens* was running back-to-back episodes for what seemed like days on end on the History Channel. On another low-budget cable show I saw a talking head from Harvard, psychologist John Mack, who treated patients who believed they’d been abducted by aliens. I found his book *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens* online and then switched the channel. (Some things can be too low-budget, you know.)

Mack writes that he was skeptical when he first began meeting with people who sincerely believed they’d had encounters with aliens, and he was completely unprepared for what he heard: “There was little to suggest that their stories were delusional, a misinterpretation of dreams, or the product of fantasy.” Mack realized he was dealing with a phenomenon that he couldn’t explain:

My choices then were . . . to keep insisting upon a psychosocial explanation consistent with the prevailing Western scientific ideology. Or, I might open to the possibility that our consensus framework of reality is too limited and that a phenomenon such as this cannot be explained within its ontological parameters. In other words, a new scientific paradigm might be necessary in order to understand what was going on.

To support this shift, Mack makes an appeal to Thomas Kuhn’s paradigm theory. Graduate students study Kuhn because he helps us to understand not just the

usefulness and necessity of having an interpretive framework in research and analysis but also how that framework can become our worst enemy once it becomes entrenched in the academy. It's like when a computer gets a virus and we look for someone to help us fix the underlying causes in the operating system. The operating system dictates what's possible and not possible on the screen. Paradigms are like that. They can limit what we see. Are you Mac or PC? Republican or Democrat? *Star Trek* or *Star Wars*?

Kuhn's seminal work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, asserts that science progresses not by the steady success of experiments but by reconsidering its methods and assumptions. Scientists will inevitably hit a snag that cannot be solved by the prevailing theory guiding their research efforts. Moving forward requires, in effect, a kind of revolution that can provide answers to the problem—but which by default tosses aside the previous paradigm as inadequate. This happens in academia on very small scales all the time, so his theory wasn't necessarily revolutionary in that regard. Rather, what Kuhn's work showed is how difficult and polemical paradigm shifts can become on the macro scale. The von Däniken scale.

Kuhn argues that “no natural history can be interpreted in the absence of at least some implicit body of intertwined theoretical and methodological belief that permits selection, evaluation, and criticism.” He also states, “To be accepted as a paradigm, a theory must seem better than its competitors, but it need not, and in fact never does, explain all the facts with which it can be confronted.” The strength of a new paradigm, for Kuhn, is found in the kinds of questions it allows researchers to ask that the prevailing paradigm did not. These questions are what ultimately allow the field to move forward. If the new paradigm proves successful, those that adhere to the old one will be regarded as basement scientists and “simply read out of the profession, which thereafter ignores their work.”

Paradigm shifts are so disruptive and disturbing because of the enormity of work and reputations built on the operative theories of interpretation. This means science functions very much like a religious belief system and falls victim to a kind of circular reasoning that prevents opponents from taking each other seriously. In order for meaningful dialogue to take place, Kuhn says, “one group or the other must experience the conversion that we have been calling a paradigm shift.” Because at some point assumptions have to be made about an interpretive theory and its viability, this requires a kind of leap of faith until proven by results.

When we began discussing the ancient astronaut theory in my Introduction to Religion courses, I found the students really needed and wanted to think about the implications more deeply. They also wanted to have such a conversation with their religious leaders, but the topic is so often dismissed as laughable, fantastical, or even heretical that they've been left alone with legitimate questions. So we now take the opportunity to watch an episode of *Ancient Aliens* and process the show's claims as a class. We proceed by analyzing the episode we watched according to the interpretive theories we've learned. We talk about what they find useful and challenging and what they find irritating and bogus. We separate legitimate philosophical concerns from entertainment and sensationalism.

Like von Däniken, *Ancient Aliens* uses both a comparative religion approach and a comparative science approach. The producers interview experts in both fields who argue for and against the ancient astronaut theory. The detractors do not hold back. My students appreciate the enormous breadth of knowledge about various cultures they had no idea existed, and watching these debates helps them vocalize their own affirmations or misgivings about the theory. *Ancient Aliens* is not a documentary, even if it is on the History Channel, nor is it intended to be. As goofy as some of the claims might seem, the show is quite well-made and even persuasive. (The budget must be enormous.)

But my students are skeptical of the excitement of the stars of the show: the ancient astronaut theorists themselves. They often pose as mere truth seekers, but it's clear they're true believers, and their quickness to dismiss long-standing scientific methods and principles turns my students off.

As far as the theory itself goes, I remind them that it's not altogether implausible. Religious origins are just too murky and subjective for us to really know, in the scientific sense, otherwise, so I try to keep open the possibility that the *imago Dei* might need to be reconsidered in light of new information. I've come to find the show immensely useful not only as discussion material but in really opening the door for those who wish to do so to think more critically about the nature of religious experience and ancient religious origins. I also find that because it addresses head-on the enormous subjectivity involved with interpreting religious experience, it requires students to learn to speak about religious doctrine less dogmatically.

In short, I do not believe alien revelations would mean the end of religion, but I do believe this topic is going to gain slow, steady credence as we learn more about

what we already know of UAP. And I regret my initial reaction when that first very earnest student asked for my opinion. It's my job to have these kinds of conversations about religion and popular culture without demeaning either one. Now, after we've learned as a class how to appreciate the different religious expressions and experiences of people all over the globe, we watch *Ancient Aliens* as a class and my question to my students is simply, "What do you think?"