

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Revisiting the Alexander UFO Religious Crisis Survey (AUFORCS): Is There Really a Crisis?

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Submitted 6/23/2011 Accepted 11/11/2011

Abstract—This paper explores the tacit presumption that U.S. government disclosure of information regarding prior contact with extraterrestrials would precipitate a religious crisis (presuming that there is information to disclose). This issue has remained controversial since the earliest ufological writing, both government and academic, yet only minimal empirical evidence has been forthcoming. The present analysis is based on data collected as a part of the Alexander UFO Religious Crisis Survey (AUFORCS), a private study of Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Jewish clergy (N = 229) conducted in 1994 whose raw data only recently have been made public (to the author of this paper). The AUFORCS consisted of 11 statements about extraterrestrial contact, alien life, and a putative impact on religion, scaled on a five-point Likert metric requiring respondents to affirm their agreement or disagreement with each item. Findings from the AUFORCS data confirm that disclosure would not precipitate much of a religious crisis. Nor do there appear to be substantive differences in how leaders of respective religious traditions would react to such disclosure. The desirability of replicating this study through a large-scale national probability survey of the U.S. adult population is discussed.

Keywords: ufology—extraterrestrials—religion—surveys

Introduction

The possibility of extraterrestrial contact is among the most contentious, and at times lurid, subjects that can be broached among academic scientists. It represents the most marginal corner of ufology, itself a marginal field of inquiry for academics. A notable challenge for physical scientists and engineers with interests here is to identify welcoming peer-reviewed outlets for their scholarly research and writing. These are few and far between, as

we all know, but thankfully *JSE* is a notable exception, and it has published serious theoretical and conceptual analyses and reviews of UFO-related themes for two decades (e.g., Swords 2006).

For social scientists, there is less stigma attached to engaging this subject, in that it may be broached descriptively without sounding any alarms, such as to characterize the beliefs or attitudes of professed contactees or to investigate potential correlates or predictors. One significant issue has intrigued and troubled government and academic investigators since the earliest decades of study in ufology: the potential for alien contact—and government disclosure of information about alien contact—to destroy the foundations of institutional religion and thus lead to widespread panic, perhaps even undermining government authority or throwing civilization into chaos. This perception has been widespread and is nicely described by Alexander (2011) in his recent book on UFOs:

The potential impact that the confirmation of extraterrestrials would have on religion has been raised in several articles. There are those who believe that ETs would be incompatible with Christianity and feel a revelation would threaten the foundations of the church. (Alexander 2011:241–242)

That this scenario would indeed come to pass is tacit to many experts and has long been treated as inevitable. At the very least, it is presumed, religious beliefs and attitudes would condition how such disclosure would be interpreted and experienced by people, regardless of whether they themselves would be threatened by such information. This presumption has been described in the ufological literature (e.g., Boeche 1988, Downing 1988), while noting an absence of conclusive empirical evidence. The authors of the well-known Brookings Report, published half a century ago, captured these sentiments in a subsection of their report entitled, “The implications of a discovery of extraterrestrial life”:

An individual's reactions to such a . . . contact would in part depend on his cultural, religious, and social background, as well as on the actions of those he considered authorities and leaders, and their behavior in turn would in part depend on their cultural, social, and religious environment. (Michael 1961:215)

This is an empirical question and, as such, can be tested. Interestingly, also in the Brookings Report, hidden away in a footnote, the authors added:

It has been speculated that, of all groups, scientists and engineers might be the most devastated by the discovery of relatively superior creatures, since

these professions are most clearly associated with the mastery of nature, rather than with the understanding and expression of man. Advanced understanding of nature might vitiate all our theories at the very least, if not also require a culture and perhaps a brain inaccessible to earth scientists. (Michael 1961:225)

This comment raises the possibility that concern over the fragility of the psyches of the American people due to religious beliefs, on the part of scientists and government officials, may be overstated. It may be scientists and government officials whose intellectual presumptions and temporal authority would stand the most to lose by disclosure of otherworldly intelligences superior to those of earthlings. But, again, the influence of disclosure on religious beliefs and attitudes, as much as the influence of such indicators on reactions to disclosure, is a matter that can be examined empirically, provided the right data are available.

While in-depth analysis of this issue has yet to occur, some documentation of public opinion, and on a national scale, has been forthcoming over the past two decades. An *ABC News / Washington Post* Poll, conducted in May 1994, identified a lifetime prevalence of having “personally ever been in contact with aliens” of only 0.5% (*ABC News / Washington Post* 1994). But other survey items showed that sensitivity to and belief in these issues may be quite higher. Questions regarding having “ever seen anything that you believe was a spacecraft from another planet” (9.8% lifetime prevalence) and affirming that UFOs are “something real [and not] just people’s imagination” (57.9%) and that other folks’ reports of contact involve “actual spacecraft from other planets” (40.8%) together provide a better indicator of personal beliefs than personal reports of contact. In other words, Americans are saying, this may not have happened to me, but I believe it to be true. More significantly, from the perspective of this present paper, follow-up revealed no differences in such beliefs between respondents who do or do not report being “a religious or spiritual person.”

The more recent National Firearms Survey, from 1999, reused the *ABC News / Washington Post* item on lifetime prevalence of contact with aliens, getting a response of 0.3% (Hemenway 1999), very close to the prior finding. Analyzing responses from the cumulative file of the National Science Foundation’s Survey of Public Attitudes, undertaken from 1979 to 2001, found that 10% of respondents affirmed that the statement that UFOs are “really space vehicles from other civilizations” is true (Miller, Kimmel, & ORC Macro 2004). Neither of these surveys asked questions that would enable a look at how religious identity, belief, or practice may or may not moderate or condition these responses. A national Roper Poll, conducted in 2002 for the Sci Fi Channel (subsequently renamed Syfy), asked whether

government disclosure of intelligent extraterrestrial life would precipitate a religious crisis. Fully 88% of respondents reported that such disclosure would have no impact on their religious beliefs, with higher numbers in successively older age cohorts, but still 80% said no in the youngest cohort (RoperASW 2002). An earlier Roper Poll, conducted in 1999, had found that three-quarters of respondents did not believe that Americans would panic (NIDS 1999), so perhaps the potential for a true existential crisis, apparently minimal as it may be, continues to wane.

The earliest formal effort to explore this issue was in the Alexander UFO Religious Crisis Survey (AUFORCS), conducted in 1994 (Alexander 1994). This survey was notable for several reasons: (a) it focused on the responses of a sample of U.S. clergy (Protestant ministers, Roman Catholic priests, and Jewish rabbis); (b) it sought agreement or disagreement with a comprehensive series of questions regarding potential government disclosure of UFO and alien-contact-related information (presuming such information exists); and (c) it was directed by Victoria Alexander, wife of retired Army Colonel Dr. John Alexander, member of the intergovernmental Advanced Theoretical Physics working group and a veteran of the U.S. Army Intelligence and Security Command and Los Alamos National Laboratory's nonlethal weapons program (see Alexander 2011). He is also an individual long subject to Internet-fueled rumors that he is the leader of the "aviary," an ostensibly secret government cabal tasked with covering up the truth about alien contact (e.g., Blum 1990). To be clear, the AUFORCS project was the brainchild of Mrs. Alexander and fully under her direction, not Dr. Alexander's. The project was underwritten by funding from the Bigelow Foundation.

The mission of the AUFORCS was simply to seek an answer to a question that has concerned government officials, if such stories are true, since the 1950s: Would disclosure of U.S. government contact with aliens really precipitate a religious crisis that would threaten continuity of government and even our civilization? To this end, Alexander conducted a mail survey of Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish clergy (additional details in the Method section, below), seeking their informed opinions about this issue. At the end of the study, a few descriptive results were tabulated and a report was issued that was circulated among people with interest in this subject, including selected members of the federal government, the military, the ufology community, academic researchers (including members of SSE), and, inevitably, the legions of conspiracy theorists populating cyberspace.

There the report has remained, over the years taking on a sort of mythic or legendary quality, but the data points, modest as they are, were yet to be subjected to a full empirical analysis. Only recently has the AUFORCS

data archive been made public—in the sense of being made available to an outside researcher. Mrs. Alexander graciously provided the present author with all of the raw surveys and all of the associated background material, preliminary analyses, correspondence, media reports, and so on—a complete file-dump essentially (a large box with these contents was shipped to his university office)—and he is now in possession of all materials related to the AUFORCS. While the survey data themselves are now more than a decade and a half old, and notwithstanding methodological limitations of the survey (to be discussed later), the historical value of the survey coupled with the opportunity, finally, to analyze these data in depth have encouraged the preparation of a brief empirical report for *JSE*, the most appropriate audience for these findings. This also provides an opportunity to broach the fascinating religious implications of this general issue, something that up until now has been subject to conjecture—and worry—but not yet comprehensively explored.

This present analysis was also informed by the similarly named Peters ETI Religious Crisis Survey, inspired by the AUFORCS and conducted a few years later (Peters & Froehlig no date). This was a larger survey, encompassing a wider range of religious affiliations, and focusing on adult respondents, not just clergy, and it also investigated a wider range of topics in astrobiology. A few of its results, which like the AUFORCS were released in a final report, suggested little reason to foresee a religious crisis of any serious magnitude. Moreover, the Peters report found that if there was any expectation of a religious crisis, it was on the part of respondents who self-identified as non-religious. Of these, 69% affirmed that “contact with extraterrestrials would so undercut traditional beliefs that the world’s religions would face a crisis” (Peters & Froehlig no date:12). Yet despite this certainty among non-believers, when respondents who actually reported affiliation with a religion were posed the same question, only 34% agreed. In other words, according to the report, “it appears that people who embrace a traditional religious belief system do not fear for their own personal belief; nor are they particularly worried about their own respective religious tradition” (p. 13). Further, “[n]on-religious people seem to know too little about religious people, because they are mistaken in their assessment of the fragility of religious beliefs” (p. 13).

The AUFORCS, unfortunately, does not include a non-religious category—this is a survey of clergy, after all—so this particular issue cannot be followed up here. But it is raised in order to document the seriousness, timeliness, and contentiousness of the larger matter of UFOs, contactees, and religion, especially the possibility that it continues to influence any government or military calculus regarding potential disclosure (presuming, as noted, that there is actually something to disclose).

Method

Sample

The AUFORCS was a pilot survey of clergy randomly selected from three large religious bodies in the continental U.S. Names and addresses of potential respondents were obtained from Data Base American Companies' PhoneDisc Reverse Fall 1993 database. In March, 1994, questionnaires were mailed to a sample of 1,000 congregations: 563 Protestant churches, 396 Roman Catholic churches, and 41 synagogues. A total of 45 surveys were returned because of an incorrect address. By the end of April, 1994, 230 surveys had been returned (229 of these were used in the present analyses; one was excluded during data entry and cleaning for reasons related to some technical ambiguities). The present sample contains questionnaires from 133 Protestant ministers, 86 Roman Catholic priests, and 10 Jewish rabbis. The overall response rate of 24% was low, as national probability surveys go, and it is unknown whether nonresponse was random or systematic. Thus, no claim is made for overall sample representativeness of the general clergy population of the U.S. But, to be fair, this is offset by the importance of this survey—at the time, a first-ever look at a social issue of critical importance to government and military leaders—and by the historical significance of these data.

As in all large-scale social surveys, there were missing data for respective questions. In the analyses that follow, the available sample size ranged from 196 to 204, depending upon the variable(s) in question. What was distinctly unusual about this particular survey was that a subset of completely blank questionnaires was returned to the investigator, and not simply discarded. Typically, these blank returns had lengthy comments, sometimes more like sermonettes, written across the pages of the instrument. These would express disapproval of the topic, or were directed at Mrs. Alexander, with expressions of concern and quotation of Bible verses. A few questionnaires even had Bible tracts stapled to them. In all, there were 22 completely blank questionnaires: 13 from priests, 8 from ministers, and only one from a rabbi. In light of the sampling distribution, Roman Catholics were overrepresented here.

The paper questionnaires returned to the investigator were anonymous, with no personal information (e.g., name) appearing anywhere. In 2011, these were forwarded to the present author, who developed a set of data codes (i.e. variable names and values) and tasked a research assistant with entering the questionnaire responses into a SAS Dataset.

Measures and Analyses

The AUFORCS consisted of 11 statements requiring respondents to affirm their agreement or disagreement with each item on a five-point Likert scale metric (coded: 1 = “strongly disagree,” 2 = “disagree,” 3 = “neither agree nor disagree,” 4 = “agree,” 5 = “strongly agree”). The 11 statements were:

1. “Official confirmation of the discovery of an advanced, technologically superior extraterrestrial civilization would have severe negative effects on the country’s moral, social and religious foundations.” (referred to in the present paper as “effects”)
2. “My congregation would perceive any contact made with a technologically advanced extraterrestrial civilization, direct or indirect, as a threat.” (“threat”)
3. “The discovery of another intelligent civilization would cause my congregation to question their fundamental concepts regarding the origin of life.” (“question”)
4. “If highly advanced intelligent life exists elsewhere in the universe, the basic tenets of religion would be present.” (“tenets”)
5. “Genetic similarities between mankind and an advanced extraterrestrial civilization would challenge the basic religious concepts of man’s relative position in the universe.” (“genetic”)
6. “If an advanced extraterrestrial civilization had religious beliefs fundamentally different from ours, it would endanger organized religion in this country.” (“endanger”)
7. “Scientific confirmation of contact with an advanced extraterrestrial civilization is probable in our lifetime.” (“confirm”)
8. “It is unlikely that direct contact with an advanced extraterrestrial civilization has occurred or is currently ongoing.” (“no contact”)
9. “My congregation would question their beliefs if an advanced extraterrestrial civilization had no system of religion.” (“no religion”)
10. “If an advanced extraterrestrial civilization proclaimed responsibility for producing human life, it would cause a religious crisis.” (“crisis”)
11. “I believe my answers to the preceding questions represent the views of my congregation.” (“represent”)

Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) of all 11 AUFORCS items were obtained using the UNIVARIATE and FREQ procedures in SAS version 9.2. ANOVA analyses of religious differences in the 11 items by the three categories of clergy (Roman Catholic, Protestant, Jewish) were conducted using the GLM procedure. Pearson correlations among all 11 items were obtained through the CORR procedure.

Results

In Table 1, descriptive statistics are presented for the 11 AUFORCS items, as well as a test of any potential religious differences in responses. For 8 of the 11 items, the average response is below the midpoint—that is expressing disagreement, on average. In other words, respondents, on average, disagree that disclosure would negatively impact the country’s foundations (“effects”), that one’s congregation would perceive alien contact as a threat (“threat”), that disclosure would cause congregants to question their beliefs (“question”), that humanoid aliens would challenge our basic religious concepts (“genetic”), that a different religion among extraterrestrials

TABLE 1
Religious Differences in the AUFORCS Questionnaire Items

AUFORCS Items	Overall Mean (sd)	Ministers Mean (sd)	Priests Mean (sd)	Rabbis Mean (sd)	F	p
Effects	2.03 (.92)	2.12 (.98)	1.89 (.83)	1.89 (1.36)	1.47	.23
Threat	2.33 (.99)	2.31 (1.00)	2.36 (.99)	1.78 (1.09)	1.35	.26
Question	1.97 (.95)	1.88 (.95)	2.07 (1.00)	1.78 (.67)	1.05	.35
Tenets	3.86 (.87)	3.95 (.86)	3.76 (.86)	3.88 (.99)	1.11	.33
Genetic	2.07 (.94)	2.03 (.97)	2.03 (.87)	2.44 (1.01)	.84	.43
Endanger	2.23 (.98)	2.15 (.98)	2.30 (.90)	2.33 (1.58)	.54	.58
Confirm	2.55 (.95)	2.37 (.92)	2.81 (.96)	2.38 (.74)	5.07	.007
No Contact	3.58 (.97)	3.68 (.95)	3.49 (.90)	3.38 (1.51)	1.18	.31
No Religion	2.14 (.95)	1.96 (.92)	2.35 (.97)	1.89 (.93)	4.15	.017
Crisis	2.64 (1.23)	2.53 (1.33)	2.62 (1.01)	2.89 (1.69)	.42	.66
Represent	3.74 (.70)	3.82 (.70)	3.62 (.70)	3.67 (.87)	1.87	.16

would endanger our own organized religions (“endanger”), that disclosure is likely in our lifetime (“confirm”), that the absence of religion among extraterrestrials would cause congregants to question their beliefs (“no religion”), and that extraterrestrials claiming to have created humans would cause a religious crisis (“crisis”). For three items, respondents score, on average, above the midpoint; thus expressing agreement, on average, with the following statements: that intelligent life elsewhere in the universe would nonetheless have religion (“tenets”), that it is unlikely that direct contact with extraterrestrials is occurring (“no contact”), and that responses likely reflect those of one’s congregants (“represent”). Finally, there are statistically significant religious differences for only two of the 11 items—“confirm” ($F = 5.07, p = .007$) and “no religion” ($F = 4.15, p = .017$)—with modestly higher scores among Roman Catholic priests, but still within the same response category for each of these items.

In Table 2, intercorrelations among the 11 AUFORCS items are

TABLE 2
Pearson Correlations of the AUFORCS Questionnaire Items

AUFORCS Items ^a	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Effects										
2. Threat	.49***									
3. Question	.41***	.45***								
4. Tenets	-.15*	.01	-.09							
5. Genetic	.36***	.31***	.51***	-.14*						
6. Endanger	.41***	.27***	.33***	-.05	.32***					
7. Confirm	-.16*	-.14*	-.03	-.06	-.11	.02				
8. No Contact	.10	.14	.09	.14	.11	.10	-.45***			
9. No Religion	.29***	.33***	.46***	-.11	.35***	.39***	.02	.08		
10. Crisis	.44***	.33***	.30***	-.11	.38***	.48***	-.09	.12	.44***	
11. Represent	-.09	-.11	-.17*	.21**	-.07	-.21**	.02	.06	-.29***	-.19**

^a Pairwise Ns range from 196 to 204.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

presented. Out of 55 correlations, 31 are statistically significant. Most of these show moderate to strong levels of intercorrelation among items, but there are a few exceptions. For one of the variables (“no contact”), there are no significant associations with any other variables except for “confirm,” which itself is only modestly and inversely related to a couple of items (“effects” and “threat”). Interestingly, this latter finding would seem to indicate that an expectation of a future danger to civilization (“effects” and “threat”) is somewhat more likely among those respondents who do not believe that scientific confirmation of alien contact is likely to occur anytime soon (“confirm”).

Discussion

These findings tell us two things, more or less. First, it does not appear that disclosure would precipitate a religious crisis of considerable magnitude. Second, at least in the present sample of clergy, there do not appear to be substantive differences in how leaders of respective religious traditions would react to such disclosure, for better or worse. Coupled with the other data reviewed in the Introduction to this paper, it can be guardedly concluded that most Americans are not as fragile emotionally, or spiritually, as certain authorities may presume. Since the early 1950s, the idea of disclosure of alien contact “was thought to be potentially socially unstabilizing—hence the need to manipulate the perceptions of the populace” (Petersen 2001:421–422). If existing data, limited as they are, tell us anything, it is that perhaps these presumptions are overstated.

In other words, if there is a religious crisis to be averted by government nondisclosure, such a crisis may be primarily in the minds of those less familiar with or engaged in religion. Perhaps the presumption of an inevitable religious crisis may reflect an irreligiousness or even hostility or condescension toward religion, on average, among physical scientists, engineers, military and intelligence officials, politicians and federal bureaucrats, and influential media figures—in other words, the opinion leaders on this subject, by their own presumption. If the present data, from this study and from other surveys and polls, tell us anything, it is that most Americans would just keep going about their business should the government some day choose to disclose evidence of an extraterrestrial presence on Earth. Prominent religious institutions would not collapse nor would major religious belief systems implode. Rather, perhaps, the implied authority of our leaders would be threatened: The public might stop being so deferential. Our world might not collapse, but maybe their world would. But this is only speculation.

The larger issue of the interface of ufology and religion may be

considerably more nuanced than has been able to be engaged with these data. Just what constitutes a UFO or alien contact (or “alien” or “contact”) and the many ways that these topics interface with the domain of religion are complex and multifaceted. In the seminal RAND report on UFOs, the famous sightings at Fatima, Portugal, in 1917 were described as “a typical UFO phenomenology” (Kocher 1968:2), an observation that might surprise or confound church authorities. The data points, if you will, that would need to be considered in any comprehensive look at the interface of alien contact and its impact on religion, and vice versa, are surely vast.

This subject begs for national probability data, such as from a large-scale social survey of the U.S. adult population, in conjunction with sufficient questions about religious identity, belief, and practice to enable more thorough investigation of any putative religious conditioning of UFO- or alien-contact-related beliefs or attitudes. Perhaps some of the AUFORCS items could be used, recrafted as necessary according to the current standards of probability survey research methods. With sufficient funding and institutional support, the present author hopes to explore these ideas within the next few years.

The AUFORCS project and other prior efforts to bring quantitative data and empirical analysis to bear on this issue are undeniably admirable, if not quite up to the current state of the art of academic social research methodology. These studies were done on a shoestring budget and, without the financial and human resources of a social research shop, they cannot be expected to match the sampling frame, response, and technical expertise of mainstream national probability surveys. On the other hand, mainstream social research efforts typically do not evince interest in the subject domain investigated by the AUFORCS and the other studies cited here. So Mrs. Alexander is to be highly commended for her foray into this topic, and the present author is grateful for the opportunity to maximize what could reasonably be extracted from these data.

This exercise has proven useful not just as a preliminary take on this issue, but also as a constructive look at the barriers to be surmounted in conducting survey research on the religious consequences of alien contact. To wit, the surveys returned blank or with religious tracts stapled to the response sheet along with plaintive handwritten invitations to the investigator to surrender her life to the Lord. Clearly, these are unusual responses, even by the standards of research on anomalous phenomena. As noted at the start of this paper, within this marginal area of inquiry—namely study of anomalous phenomena, which includes the field of parapsychology and some domains of ufology—research on contact with extraterrestrials may be its most marginal corner. Folding in consideration of a topic as

contentious as religion makes this a subject that many perhaps would choose to avoid. But, as indicated earlier, this subject concerns an issue that may be of pressing national security interest, if certain reports are to be believed. If so, then academic scientists and scholars ought not shy away from more in-depth investigation of the religious correlates and consequences of beliefs and attitudes about disclosure and of disclosure itself.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Victoria Alexander for generously turning over the archives of the AUFORCS to his research program. He would also like to acknowledge the assistance of Daniel Jang, who handled the computer data entry of the AUFORCS questionnaires.

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