

Chariots, UFOs, and the Mystery of God

by Ted Peters

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Twenty million copies of *Chariots of the Gods?* (Bantam, 1968) have been sold, and its author, the young Swiss Erich von Däniken, is campaigning aggressively for converts to 'his thesis that our earth was visited by interstellar travelers between 40,000 and 500 BC. He sanctioned "In Search of Ancient Astronauts," the TV travelogue that has been screened throughout the U.S. in the past year or so. Narrated by Rod Serling, it presents the evidence supporting von Däniken's claim. More recently, he authorized a full-length feature movie bearing the book's title. The movie -- a 90-minute compilation of footage taken at various archaeological sites around the globe which purportedly proves the thesis -- has now been released in most Western countries. (Currently it is showing at 24 theaters in Moscow.)

Symptoms of the Pseudo-Scientist

How has von Däniken managed to get such a grip on the curiosity of Europeans and Americans? I submit that his views are received so avidly because they appear to wed scientific method with religious doctrine. A decade ago, as Theodore Roszak and others have pointed out, our young people repudiated the West's scientific mind-set. But today's college students have turned away from the counterculture of the '60s and, like the older generation, profess to value science. At the same time, both groups are in quest of new religious foundations. Unfortunately, most of these people are not sophisticated enough in either science or religion to be able to discriminate between good and bad science and between true and false religion. That is why a book like *Chariots of the Gods?* has been so eagerly received. It seems to blend science and religion in an exciting and

respectable way. In fact, however, it does nothing of the sort. Consider von Däniken's "science" first.

In his delightful *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science* (Dover, 1957), Martin Gardner describes the characteristics which distinguish the pseudo-scientist, or crank, from the orthodox scientist. For one thing, the pseudo-scientist works in almost total isolation; i.e., he holds no fruitful dialogue with fellow researchers. Of course he insists that his isolation is not his fault but that of the established scientific community and its prejudice against new ideas. He never tires of citing the numerous novel scientific theories which were initially condemned but later proved true.

Second, the pseudo-scientist is likely to be paranoid. Gardner lists five ways in which these paranoid tendencies manifest themselves: (1) the pseudo-scientist considers himself a genius and (2) regards his colleagues as ignorant blockheads; (3) he believes himself unjustly persecuted and discriminated against; (4) he focuses his attacks on the greatest scientists and the best-established theories; and (5) he often employs a complex jargon and in many cases coins words and phrases (neologisms) of his own. Do any of these characteristics fit Erich von Däniken? Except for the fifth, I suggest that they do.

Von Däniken's thesis is this: the postulate that the earth was once visited by spacemen from another world serves better to account for ancient artifacts than do the scientific theories now accepted (p. 51). Why then has the scientific community either refused to consider von Däniken's position or rejected it out of hand? For several reasons. First, scientific investigation as now carried on is out of date, because the investigations do not ask of the past questions based on our knowledge of space travel; i.e., they presuppose that ancient man could not fly, consequently they cannot accurately assess evidence that he did when they find it (pp. 13 f., 83). Yet the only conclusions available to research are those which are arrived at in response to the questions asked. If you do not ask the right questions, the right answers will never appear. To put it another way, von Däniken claims that if archaeology does not question its data on the basis of what we now know about space travel, it cannot possibly set up an explanatory theory that takes account of space travel. In principle, there is nothing wrong with this claim; it is sound hermeneutics.

But the second reason von Däniken advances to explain orthodox science's prejudiced condemnation of his postulate sounds a bit more "pseudo." He argues that today's scientists stubbornly persist in refusing to admit that they need to change their methods and theories (pp. 29, 61, 80, 107, 122). Since they assume that ours is the most advanced civilization in the history of this planet, they are blind to any evidence that civilizations higher than our own once existed (pp. 28, 73). For example, present archaeological theory explains artifacts in terms of "primitive" religion and refuses to entertain other possibilities (p. 32). Thus the orthodox scientific community has shut itself off from the truth beforehand. Here is a clear symptom of the pseudo-scientist: the established scientists are block-heads who cannot see past their noses.

Von Däniken's third reason is an extension of the second. He claims that modern science will not consider any theoretical explanations which tend to cast doubt on the accuracy of the Jewish and Christian Bibles. He says that "even the scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries . . . were still caught in the mental fetters of thousand-year-old errors, because the way back would inevitably have called in question parts of the biblical story"(p.50). It is amazing that, after all we have been through with Galileo, Darwin, Freud and fundamentalism, von Däniken should still speak of a scientific-religious conspiracy to defend the literal authority of the Bible. In projecting a conspiracy against himself, the pseudo-scientist reveals one of the most serious symptoms of paranoia. Certainly von Däniken's ego seems to be of grandiose dimensions, for what greater establishment could a theorist seek to triumph over than a unified Judeo-Christian- scientific conspiracy?

Von Däniken's fourth argument for the credibility of his claim is that the orthodox scientific community has frequently erred in the past (pp. 6, 29f, 68). For thousands of years it insisted that the sun orbits the earth, and less than a hundred years ago it decreed that objects heavier than air could never fly. That von Däniken stands alone against gigantic opposition from the scientific establishment does not prove that he is wrong. Rather, it suggests that the scientific establishment, having been wrong so often in the past, may well be wrong again. Here surely is the pseudo-scientist harping on an obvious theme to his own advantage.

Easter Island Revisited

An examination of von Däniken's argument from literary and archaeological evidence indicts him beyond appeal. Invariably he employs a four-step formula: (1) he reports an interesting archaeological discovery or cites a passage from ancient literature; (2) he describes it as only partly explained or even baffling; (3) he raises a hypothetical question regarding its origin, sometimes suggesting intervention from outer space; and (4) he goes on to another subject.

Thus von Däniken speaks about Easter Island and the hundreds of gigantic stone statues that have been standing there since time immemorial. Some of these colossi are as much as 66 feet high and weigh as much as 50 tons each (pp. 90,96). Originally they wore stone hats weighing over ten tons apiece. What is more, the stone for the hats came from a quarry different from that which supplied the stone for the bodies, and in addition the hats had to be hoisted high in the air. The usual explanation is that the stone giants and their hats were moved to their present sites on wooden rollers and put in place by the conventional "heave-ho" methods. But von Däniken is amazed at the very suggestion that primitive people could accomplish such feats of engineering. He speculates that even 2,000 men, working day and night (for how long?), would not be nearly enough to carve these colossal figures out of the steel-hard volcanic stone with rudimentary tools; and the island is so small that it could scarcely have provided food for more than 2,000 people. So von Däniken dangles questions before the reader: ". . . who did the work? And how did they manage it?" (p. 91). This surely is an egregious case of the *argumentum ad ignorantiam*; it proceeds by way of an unanswerable challenge to disprove rather than by way of a serious attempt to prove. We are supposed to conclude that highly skilled technicians from space were responsible. Von Däniken then turns to another topic.

But let me cite a few facts about Easter Island that will reveal the "pseudo" quality of von Däniken's scientific investigation. The Norwegian explorer Thor Heyerdahl seems to have resolved the mystery in his book *Aku-Aku: The Secret of Easter Island* (Rand McNally, 1958). He persuaded some of the natives of the island to demonstrate the procedure for carving and erecting the statues. He found that it would take six men using simple stone implements about a year to carve a 15-foot statue. Next, 180 men attached ropes to a statue weighing between 25 and 30 tons and pulled it across the island by the ancient "heave-ho" method. They demonstrated also how the

colossi were stood upright by pushing stones under a log lever and how ramps were constructed to put the hats on top. Von Däniken quotes Heyerdahl in *Chariots of the Gods?* -- but very selectively.

The Numbers Game

Von Däniken also plays the numbers game. He asks, for example, ". . . is it really a coincidence that the height of the pyramid of Cheops [in Egypt] multiplied by a thousand million -- 98 million miles -- corresponds approximately to the distance between the earth and the sun? . . . Is it a coincidence that the area of the base of the pyramid divided by twice its height gives the celebrated figure pi, 3.14159265?" (pp. 76f.). We are supposed to conclude that the pyramids were constructed under the supervision of spacemen. But in *Fads and Fallacies* Gardner analyzes the baffling numbers technique. If you set about measuring a complicated structure like the pyramid of Cheops, he says, you will soon have dozens of measurements to play with; and if you have the patience to juggle them about in various ways, you are bound to come out with many figures that coincide with important historical dates or with scientific calculations.

Gardner supposes, just for the fun of it, that the number five has a particularly numinous quality, and then imagines that he opens the *World Almanac* to the entry on the Washington Monument.

Its height is 555 feet and 5 inches. The base is 55 feet square, and the windows are set at 500 feet from the base. If the base is multiplied by 60 (or five times the number of months in a year) it gives 3,300, which is the exact weight of the capstone in pounds. Also, the word "Washington" has exactly ten letters (two times five). And if the weight of the capstone is multiplied by the base, the result is 181,500 -- a fairly close approximation of the speed of light in miles per second. If the base is measured with a 'Monument foot,' which is slightly smaller than the standard foot, its side comes to 55 ^{1/2} feet. This times 33,000 yields a figure even closer to the speed of light. . . . It should take an average mathematician about fifty-five minutes to discover the above "truths," working only with the meager figures provided by the Almanac [*op. cit.*, p. 179].

Bible readers will be interested in another of von Däniken's arguments. He writes: ". . . *without actually consulting Exodus*, I seem to remember that the Ark was often surrounded by flashing sparks. . . Undoubtedly the Ark was

electrically charged" (p. 40; italics mine). He goes on to insist that God was really a spaceman with whom Moses communicated via an electrical transmitter whenever he needed help or advice. Well, I *have* consulted Exodus and could not locate the flashing sparks. I am not flatly saying that von Däniken's thesis is wrong. But I say that if scholarly integrity is part of what defines genuine science, Erich von Däniken definitely belongs on the pseudo-science side of the ledger.

God as Supertechician

What von Däniken actually says about religion is not immediately clear to me, though it seems to be clear to some of his readers -- for instance, to the retired Denver businessman who, after reading *Chariots of the Gods?*, remarked that all of our Western ideas about religion will have to be rethought.

Happily, one R. L. Dione, a schoolteacher from Old Saybrook, Connecticut, has published *God Drives a Flying Saucer* (Bantam, 1968), a little jewel of a book which might serve as the theological extension of von Däniken's theory. Although working independently of von Däniken, Dione operates on the same hermeneutical principle: reinterpretation of the past from the standpoint of space-age presuppositions. In his case, the past is the Bible and the presupposition is that flying saucers, or UFOs, are manned by humanoid creatures from outer space. He argues that God is not supernatural but supertechnological, and is capable of producing by technical-mechanical means all acts hitherto attributed to his miraculous powers. God is really a humanoid creature, living on another planet. who has made himself immortal through technology. He created the human race on earth for his entertainment -- in order to observe our evolution.

Dione seems under a compulsion to translate everything in our religious tradition which hints of the supernatural into naturalistic terms. His credo is a stern faith in natural science. He maintains that miracles, Christian or otherwise, break no laws of nature; that as soon as science understands all the laws of nature we shall realize that miracles can never occur. God is a technician, not a magician (pp. 44 f.). To be sure, the Bible says that Jesus miraculously healed the crippled and the blind. But what really happened was this: spacemen had previously hypnotized certain people into infirmities of a psychosomatic nature, and at the same time had programmed them to respond to Jesus by way of posthypnotic suggestion. Again, the Bible tells of

the visits to Abraham and others by supernatural beings known as angels; however, they were really messengers from outer space who were trying to influence the course of human affairs according to God's interplanetary directives. With regard to the Virgin Mary -- who was undoubtedly a virgin at Jesus' birth -- the angel Gabriel was a biological specialist who artificially inseminated the Mother of God with a hypodermic needle. The semen, of course, came from that supertechnological deity somewhere in the outer reaches of space. Dione even explains the apparition of Our Lady of Fatima in 1917; the Lady, he says, was a UFO hovering above the ground, shedding a mist which lent it a luminous glow, and then communicating telepathic messages calling the people of Portugal to repentance and faith.

What such theories make clear, it seems to me, is that their authors are driven by a strong desire to re-explain the more mysterious dimensions of our spiritual existence in naturalistic categories. Theorists like von Däniken and Dione believe that all reality is just a finite number of natural laws, all of which can in principle be known -- and then perhaps manipulated -- by the human mind. Obviously the mood or mind-set of naturalistic scientific thinking has a grip on these authors and their followers. But they are scientific only in mood, because in their haste to supply the ultimate explanation they have flouted the rules basic to scientific method: tedious experimentation and cautious hypothesizing.

It must be said, however, that the urge to re-explain religious mysteries is not unique to UFO theologians; it has been pervasive among religious intellectuals for the past two centuries. How often have we been told that the ecstatic prophets and demon-possessed characters of the Bible were merely victims of what we now know as epilepsy? Or that the fire and brimstone which the Lord sent down on Sodom and Gomorrah were really the result of an explosion of the sulfur beds underlying those cities? No, the naturalistic perspective is as much a part of our religious consciousness today as is the Bible itself. In this sense, von Däniken is simply doing what other theologians are doing. What is at issue is whether he does it well or not. In my opinion he does not do it well at all.