

THE ACADEMY AND THE IMPOSSIBLE – A TALE OF TWO BIBLES

David J. Halperin

Professor Emeritus, Religious Studies

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

This is a tale, or perhaps a string of tales, about my time in academia, teaching Judaic studies at the University of North Carolina. I worked in a department that when I joined it in 1976 was called the Department of Religion but which changed its name, in the interest of the scholarly detachment of which I'll speak presently, to Department of Religious Studies. I remained there until my retirement at the end of 2000, teaching mostly courses on Judaism, but occasionally stepping across the border to teach about the New Testament and early Christianity.

In the spring term of 1992, I taught what was supposed to be a lecture course, "Introduction to the New Testament," which enrolled 263 students (for some reason, I've never forgotten the exact number). I say, "supposed to be," because by 1992 I'd become convinced that lecturing to students is a waste of time that might better be spent teaching them, "teaching" being by its nature an interactive experience. Interactive teaching with a class of 263 might seem an impossibility. But the premise of this conference and these archives is that impossible things are nonetheless worthy of attention, and by the end of the semester my TAs and I had pulled it off rather well.

Early in the semester, a well-meaning relative gave me a piece of advice on teaching New Testament to a class of North Carolina students: "Don't tell them you're Jewish." I nodded politely, although it occurred to me that I might have responded: *Oh, I don't mention that I'm Jewish very often. Only about two or three times a week.*

Because my being Jewish was vital to the course as I conceived it, no less than its interactivity. Let me explain.

Over the years, I had come to the conviction that a religious-studies department in a university had a dual mission vis-à-vis its undergraduates: (1) shake them up, and (2) build them

up. We'd gotten very good at the shaking-up part. It gave us a certain smug gratification when a student said: when I started taking religion courses, I used to be a believing Baptist (or whatever); now I don't know what I believe. We felt good about this because it showed we were at least having some impact. That the impact was negative and destructive didn't usually bother us. We figured, oh, well, we've done our job, they can take it from here. We didn't think we had any obligation to help our students "take it from here."

I came to believe that this was wrong. That a student shouldn't leave without his or her faith, but with a more solid faith that wasn't ours or anyone else's but truly his or her own. And that we had some responsibility to shepherd them in this process.

So I had to shake my students up and also build them up. My being an unconverted Jew teaching New Testament was already enough of a shake-up; I didn't have to do anything more in this direction. My job was to help them acquire for themselves a solid knowledge of Christian Scripture that would move them in the direction of whatever variety of faith or infidelity—itsself a subcategory of faith—that their souls called them to.

My TAs and I solicited from the students lists of questions that they wanted answered by the end of the semester. A prominent one was: what could they believe about the miracles attributed to Jesus? We discussed this in one of our "lecture" classes. Did Jesus walk on water? I had a simple answer to the question: people can't walk on water, therefore Jesus never walked on water. (And the subtext: I'm a Jew; of course I don't believe Jesus walked on water.)

I then asked the class: does that answer satisfy you?

The response: a thunderous NO!!!

To which I said: OK; now our job is to give you the tools you need to find your own answers, which *will* satisfy you.

Which they went ahead and did.

So what has all this got to do with our "Archives of the Impossible"?

If Jesus's walking on water isn't an impossibility, I don't know what is. It's as impossible as the sun that fell to earth at Fatima, Portugal, in October 1917—witnessed by a crowd of many thousands—or that sun's cousins the UFOs that began to appear in American skies thirty years later. “With God nothing shall be impossible,” says the Gospel (Luke 1:37); but God Himself is pretty impossible, at least in the Biblical rendition of Him. *Things impossible yet compelling*, and therefore in some sense true—that's what the study of religion deals with. I would take as one of the goals of our conference to broaden the scope of that study, and therefore of religion itself.

For many years, the UNC Department of Religious Studies offered advanced seminars under the rubric of “Religion 193: Special Topics in Mysticism.” It was in the fall semester of 1996 that I finally ventured to teach, under this rubric, a course on “Heavenly Ascensions and UFO Abductions.” My colleagues had long known that religious traditions of heavenly ascent were my special area of interest; my Ph.D. dissertation, on the rabbinic traditions of the *merkavah* (the “chariot” vision of Ezekiel chapter 1), was an expression of this interest. They were also aware of my teenage fascination with UFOlogy; some of them may have grasped its connection with my more academically respectable work on the *merkavah*. But it wasn't until my later years of teaching—not incidentally, long after I'd gotten tenure—that I ventured formally to bring the two together.

This seminar will investigate the mystical theme of the heavenly ascent. Its focus will be on a contemporary manifestation of this theme, in the form of UFO abduction reports. We will examine these stories in a broad cross-cultural context, as well as in the immediate context of the UFO tradition of the past fifty years.

That was the opening of my syllabus. One of the required books for the course was Whitley Strieber's *Communion*. (The others were John Mack's *Abduction: Human Encounters*

with *Aliens* and Curtis Peebles's *Watch the Skies! A Chronicle of the Flying Saucer Myth*.) One of the requirements was to write a critical review of *Communion*:

The review should be about 6-8 pages long, and should attempt to provide a reasoned answer to the question of what experiential reality, if any, underlies the book. If you wish to argue that it is a conscious fraud, you may do so, provided that you offer a plausible motivation for Strieber's having concocted it. You may also argue, if you like, that Strieber is insane; but, in that case, you must at least make some attempt to analyze the nature of his insanity. (Just saying, "He's nuts," will not do the trick.)

I've been out of the academy for more than twenty years, and I can't offer a guess as to how many courses along these lines are currently offered in the nation's colleges and universities. What was telling at the time was the reaction of one of my colleagues, who took for granted that a course on UFOs would be a "funny" course, presumably devoted to snickering at those tinfoil-hat types foolish enough to believe in them. I shook my head. "Whatever UFOs are, they aren't funny," I said, and offered in support Barney Hill's sudden death of a stroke at the tragically young age of 46, on what was almost exactly the fifth anniversary of the day his traumatic abduction memories began to emerge in hypnotic trance. I now would not quite stand by that statement, because I believe that the ridicule surrounding the UFO phenomenon is itself an aspect of the phenomenon, and needs to be dispassionately analyzed along with the rest. But I would reaffirm my conviction of the essential gravity of the UFO, no less than of any other manifestation of the religious impulse and experience.

Some of my students, reading *Communion* and undertaking to write their essays on it, began having bizarre experiences in connection with the book which considerably unsettled them. I would tell you what these experiences were, but I neglected to record them at the time—a strange sort of negligence, which I have experienced in myself in other contexts—and now remember none of the details. In chapter 4 of my *Intimate Alien: The Hidden Story of the UFO*

(Stanford University Press, 2020), I explore the remarkable phenomenon of the “recognition response,” documented in the Strieber collection of letters now open to researchers through the Archives of the Impossible, that thousands of people have had to this book and especially to the iconic alien image on its cover. My students re-enacted something of this phenomenon, as did I in forgetting the details of their experiences; not for nothing did I entitle chapter 4 “The Lure of the Unremembered.” This perhaps debouches into the wider problem of the mythic theme of UFO secrecy—Men in Black, government cover-ups and the like ... But back to the subject of academia.

Long before I taught the large introductory course on the New Testament, I regularly taught a fall-semester course called “Introduction to Judaic Civilization.” And, as I did with the New Testament course, I had my students write at the beginning of the semester a list of the questions about Judaism they wanted to have answered by semester’s end. Most of those questions I have long forgotten. One, however, has stuck in my mind.

I don’t believe in God, but I like going to Friday evening services. Does that make me a hypocrite?

This was precisely the kind of question I liked for my students to ask—a question that we could approach through the academic study of Judaism, and the role that individual belief has historically played in it, and yet that had immediate bearing on their own spiritual lives. It was not the sort of question that academic religious studies encouraged. We liked to “prescind” from such questions, as I think the phrase went, to adopt a rigorously detached and neutral stance toward the phenomena we studied. Our churches or synagogues (or mosques or ashrams) were the proper places for such “confessional” matters, which there we might explore to our hearts’ content. Our students might do the same, in their own churches. We of course were tolerant of it but wanted nothing to do with it. That wasn’t what we did in our classrooms, our faculty seminars, our published scholarship.

I have considerable sympathy for this position. By declaring certain questions off limits, we made it possible for men and women of widely disparate confessional backgrounds to work together as colleagues. We made sure that inter-religious polemic would not dominate our classrooms. It's very likely that it was this stance of neutrality, this consciously chosen indifference to hot-button confessional issues that made it possible for me to find a comfortable home at the University of North Carolina for nearly 25 years.

In 1975, shortly before I interviewed at UNC, one of the most popular and inspirational professors in the department died of a sudden heart attack. He'd been in the habit, I discovered, of using his "Introduction to the Old Testament" course to evangelize, much to the distress of his Jewish students. How would I have felt working with such a colleague? But things were changing at UNC, and he was the last of his kind. For the next quarter century, I felt fully respected for what I did, and our official secularity—however devout we might be in private life—had much to do with that.

But this stance had a significant downside. It meant that *precisely the questions that our students took our courses to find informed answers to*—is there a God? do I have a soul, mortal or immortal? under what perspective am I to shape my life?—were the ones declared off limits, never to be spoken in our determinedly secular halls. The question of *experiential reality*, which I challenged my students to take up and examine in Whitley Strieber's *Communion*, was also under some suspicion. When asked, how real were the visions of the Biblical prophets or the medieval mystics? we fobbed off the question with some reply like that they were *real to them*, and were relieved to change the subject. Because if the visions were real in some sense beyond the subjective perceptions of the experiencers, that might imply that Yahveh or the risen Christ were also real. And that was precisely what we would have done almost anything rather than say.

Our students were not oblivious to our evasions. I heard the complaint: our professors never tell us what they believe! I resolved, for myself, not to speak of my personal beliefs or disbeliefs in the classroom—since I expected that not every student would want to know about

them—but never to refuse to answer student questions in the privacy of my office. I recall saying to one student many years ago, *I don't believe in God, but I do believe in mystery*, and although I never proclaimed this stance, my belief in mystery came more and more to inform my courses in the 1990s, as my teaching career drew near its end. (Not quite so much so my disbelief in the Deity, about which I've come to have some reservations.) And today: I don't believe in UFOs, but the spell they cast over millions, that they've cast over me since my adolescence—the fascination that guided me silently through my doctoral research on the *merkavah*, in a vocabulary utterly different from that of contemporary UFOlogy but reflecting the same bedrock reality—is the mystery that's brought me to these Archives of the Impossible. A mystery I do not think I will ever fully solve, any more than we will ever know whether or not there's a God. But which brings through its irresolvable nucleus, as mystery often does, enlightenment and healing.

In one of my last years at UNC, I taught a spring-semester seminar on the Book of Revelation. The seminar was mostly undergrad, but a few graduate students in the religious studies department participated as well. The second half of the semester was given over to student presentations, and at our last class meeting a grad student named Chris presented his research on the “sea of glass” in Revelation 4:6, interpreted in its context in the ancient Greco-Roman world.

It was a beautiful spring day, the kind that the nothing-could-be-finer-than-to-be-in-Carolina-in-the-morning song was written about, and we had the class outside on the lawn, sitting in a circle. After Chris gave his presentation, one of the evangelical students in the class—I think his name was Kip—spoke most movingly about his response to it. It was the first time, he said, that he really understood the value of the academic approach to religion. He told us: I have two Bibles. One was the Revised Standard Version, with the standard scholarly annotations, that he used for his coursework in the religious studies department. The other was the Bible that he used for his personal devotions, which I imagine was the King James Version.

On this lovely spring morning, it seemed to me as I heard him speak, Kip's two Bibles had coalesced.

I believe that, in response, I compared his two Bibles to the two lenses of a pair of glasses. I hope that, in the twenty or twenty-five years that have passed since then, Kip has continued to see reality through that pair of lenses. I would encourage us to use a similar set of lenses in viewing our own chosen impossibilities, be they UFOlogy or some other variety of religious experience, Judaism and Christianity not excluded. The one lens is rational detachment, expressed through the modes of scholarship to which we academics are long accustomed. The other is heartfelt involvement—the conviction that, impossible or not, *this is real*, in the way that a powerful and transformative dream is real. However fantastic and implausible its individual components may seem.

Seeing through these dual glasses—well, we may experience a touch of vertigo. But we shall not be among the blind.