

When religion joins the UFO conversation

“The nexus of religion, technology, and culture is more interrelated than most people assume,” says professor and filmmaker Brett Robinson.

Interview by [Jessica Mesman](#)

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Century illustration (Source images: Getty)

Brett Robinson is director of outreach and associate professor of the practice at the University of Notre Dame's McGrath Institute for Church Life. As part of his research at the intersection of religion, tech, and culture, he worked with filmmaker Robert Duncan to create the documentary film [Edge of Belief: UFOS, Technology, and the Catholic Imagination](#).

What's the connection between UFOs and what your documentary's title refers to as "the Catholic imagination?"

The Catholic imagination is a sacramental imagination that sees the world as signs of God's presence and providence, the sacraments being the ultimate expression of that. Catholics believe that art, literature, and nature and the humanities can all point to God, if we're properly disposed. In the context of the film, the idea was, Could we ask this question about ET and non-human intelligence, using the perceptual tools or apparatus of the Catholic imagination? Can we see the questions of the cosmos as signs of something that God is doing that may be mysterious but that has meaning and order? That's why we chose not just scientists to interview but also artists, theologians, and philosophers—because we believe the imagination helps us think beyond mere facts and empirical evidence.

So something beyond materialism?

Yeah, beyond materialism. The catalyst for this project was the book *American Cosmic*, by religious studies professor Diana Pasulka, who appears in the film. She helped me crystallize some strands of thought that I've been pursuing for 20-plus years now at the intersection of religion, technology, and, let's say, the mysterious.

Pasulka's thesis is that there is a supernatural reality, a spiritual reality, that has been ignored in a lot of the UFO narratives because of the prevailing materialist worldview. The midcentury understanding was that all this had something to do with military experiments. There was this Cold War fear of the other that might have world-ending consequences, like the atom bomb. We still see some of that. But Pasulka's work shows that people who have had UFO encounters, or experiences of a mysterious kind, have been assigning spiritual significance to it.

Pasulka isn't the only researcher in the field to say there is a spiritual component to the UFO phenomenon. Others describe it as having something to do with human consciousness. But Pasulka says in the

documentary that she realized, listening to people's stories, that this was a new kind of religion.

Yeah, so, if you're familiar with the famous Betty and Barney Hill kind of UFO experience from the 1960s—where they see this thing in the sky as they're driving their car and then they lose time—that account became a template for UFO sightings, and it felt like it was taken right out of the pages of a sci-fi novel. Now if you talk to someone who had a UFO experience, they'll often describe beings of light and a kind of spiritual awakening that occurs after the encounter. Their perceptual lens has shifted. That got me really interested in asking, What would this mean for people who are already religious believers? The way that UFO researchers talk about it, Pasulka included, is that these experiences can be a source of ontological shock.

She says that UFO disclosure would shatter secularism.

Right. And for Christians, if there is extraterrestrial life, then revelation didn't account for some things that are outside the boundaries of scripture. That's why I think the Catholic imagination is helpful here: it includes scripture, of course, but also tradition, and that tradition includes intellectual, artistic, and aesthetic elements that give us more tools to think about something like this.

Like the mystical tradition of the Western church?

That's where Pasulka started, with mystical experiences in the Middle Ages. That's how she made the leap. In the documentary, she describes researching her book on purgatory and hearing stories about nuns in convents who were seeing little orbs of light that they assumed were souls. When she heard accounts of UFO experiences, she thought, well, these sound like the same thing, just interpreted using the meme of the day. So for us, it's a science fiction narrative about beings from outer space. For a medieval nun, it was spirits from purgatory. But maybe the phenomenon is the same, and we're just reading it differently.

So it's that shift in perception that appeals to you as a scholar?

Yes, my research has been in the ways technology becomes a kind of system or social order that tends to cultivate certain fideistic attitudes: *We have to have faith in this system*. But if the internet were to break down tomorrow, what would we do? These are the sort of cataclysmic consequences that are only rivaled by something like religion, something apocalyptic. So I've always had that fascination with

technology—the way that it can become part of the imagination in an almost religious way. We use these technological devices that make us omniscient and omnipresent and omnipotent, so we take on these kind of god-like qualities.

There's a certain strand of gnosticism in this, that the digital gives us an escape from the body. These machines we all use are very discarnate—we're not present to one another. It's a sort of angelism; we are communicating over the air almost telepathically. I feel like that has so much religious resonance, although it's not often couched in those terms. So when Pasulka came along with her book that basically made the same argument but included UFOs in that equation, it resonated with me very strongly.

The nexus of religion, technology, and culture is more interrelated than most people assume. I'm following the thinking of Marshall McLuhan—and, speaking of the Catholic imagination, Walter Ong, a Jesuit priest, who really saw these shifts. The first big shift in human communication is from literacy to the printing press, which is the mechanization of writing, and then we move from the electric to the digital. At each of these transition points, a new epoch is announced, and everything changes. So there are obvious changes socially, economically, and there are also changes in religion and religious culture. I've always contended that the second Vatican Council was as much a reaction to television as it was to the development of doctrine in the Catholic church. So it's about trying to come to terms with an environment that is very different from the previous environment, and because it affects us at the level of perception—how we understand and view reality—it has deeper religious implications.

How does the documentary address that ontological shift?

Most documentaries have a narrative arc: here's the mystery, here's the evidence, here's the resolution or the lingering question. We took a much more mosaic approach, where we took people from completely different disciplines and asked them the same kinds of questions.

So scientist Jonathan Lunine looks at the chemical composition of other planets and stars and comes to some conclusions about their habitability. Then the philosophers and theologians we interview—Marie George, Chris Baglow—can reflect on whether or not aliens are fallen creatures and what that implies about Christ's mission on earth. And artist and iconographer Jonathan Pageau can speculate on whether or not this is

just the emergence of some kind of archetype or symbol of the unknown that has spiritual power.

The documentary doesn't land on any one answer. It doesn't say, *Well, aliens exist, so here's what you should think*, or *Aliens don't exist, so don't worry about it*. Instead, we attempt to give a deeper understanding of how we might address these ontological questions.

How does this project advance the mission of Notre Dame's McGrath Institute for Church Life?

Our mission is to build a bridge between the academy and the Catholic church and to offer the intellectual resources of the university to those working in the church to address contemporary pastoral challenges. This film came out of our science and religion initiative, funded by the Templeton Foundation, to help Catholic school teachers who are always running into this issue—the supposed divide between faith and science—to show that these are complementary disciplines, that they aren't in opposition. To think in a “catholic” way is inherently interdisciplinary. We want to show how you can have conversations across disciplines. We modeled that by picking this big topic.

I'm the director of outreach here, and we're interested in different forms of public engagement, whether it's film or social media, to extend the reach of our programming. Our initiative in science and religion asks the same kinds of questions we are asking in the documentary. Chris Baglow, who runs that program, is frequently asked to speak on this topic. So we thought, OK, how about we make this documentary, and then you could use it in your classes and other programming.

Do you see more openness in academia to talking about UFO experiences?

It depends who you talk to. Certainly there are still those who think if you even talk about these subjects, you're a crackpot. Some are so extreme in their opposition that they're willing to take down any discourse about it. There were certainly people in academia who didn't want to participate in this project.

On the other hand, you have religious studies scholars like Pasulka at the University of North Carolina and Jeffrey Kripal at Rice University who are at the forefront of these conversations. There's Paul Thigpen, a retired theologian who spoke at Stanford at a conference held by the Sol Foundation, which does academic research

into unidentified aerial phenomena. Gary Nolan, a cancer researcher at Stanford, is doing research on people who have been injured by these things in their encounters and suffer really strange injuries and diseases. There's also Jacques Vallée, who we interviewed for the documentary, though not on camera. He's sort of the grandfather of all this, as a ufologist, and he was also very involved in the development of early internet technology.

Vallée was the inspiration for the French scientist Claude Lacombe in Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

Yes, these are true believers! So it really depends who you talk to. You see splits on this issue even at the departmental level in universities. It can be a real stretch to get people to think outside the materialist framework.

But this isn't a documentary for true believers, or even one that is trying to convince the viewer of a particular point of view. It's offering a way to introduce viewers to the discourse. We're showing viewers: here's what the military is saying; here's what scientists are saying; here's what theologians are saying—and helping them think about the topic and integrate it into their religious thought.

At times it was like we were having a conversation with an imaginary interlocutor who wasn't there, someone who is asking questions about what they're reading about and seeing, and all the people we interviewed are just giving their best answers.

A 2017 *New York Times* investigation confirmed that the US government has funded research on UAPs. Last year, former Air Force intelligence officer David Grusch testified under oath that for decades, the government has operated a reverse engineering program of “recovered vessels”—and that we have nonhuman “biologics” from alleged crash sites. And yet if I bring up my interest in the subject, most people still look at me like I'm wearing a tinfoil hat.

What made you realize you want to take this seriously, as both a scholar and a Catholic?

This goes back to the work I have been doing my whole career, which is trying to understand how shifts in technology shift perception and retune us for awareness to different things. A good example of this is in the early 20th century, with the advent

of the telegraph and electricity, we see this big spike in spiritualism—the belief that we can talk to the dead—and people gathering for séances. And they're communicating with these spirits through these knocks that are essentially Morse code. So you can see how technological metaphors insinuate themselves in the occult imagination.

During the 20th century—with the threat of nuclear holocaust, with technology that's advancing at a rate we've never seen, with the mythology of the Roswell, New Mexico, UFO crash in 1947—there is this growing crescendo in the popular imagination around both science fiction and the real nuts-and-bolts, military kinds of incursions that are happening. Then we hit this apex where the internet and social media become the new paradigm. We now have a lot more bottom-up mythologizing about all sorts of things. What used to be on the fringe back bookshelf of the bookstore is now just common knowledge.

We've also now introduced new technologies that *feel* really alien, like AI. This is a nonhuman intelligence by definition. It *seems* to have intelligence. It can generate what seem like thoughts. It can communicate. So I think it gives birth to a new mythology that is way more conducive to these kinds of UFO experienter narratives—the kinds of stories that Pasulka is telling in her books—and also the stories that we're telling in the film.

I feel like if we'd put this out in 1986, maybe someone watches it on some cable access channel, but that's where it ends. Now it's in the mainstream news. Disclosure was the subject of a congressional hearing last summer. There's definitely more attention and awareness. Christians should be part of the conversation.