

Aliens Among Us? A Sociocultural Investigation of Extraterrestrial Belief Narratives

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Abstract

This article investigates the persistence of extraterrestrial “living among us” narratives as cultural constructs rather than empirical claims, situating them within the intersections of mythology, sociology of religion, folklore, psychology, and media studies. Using a narrative review with interdisciplinary synthesis, the study analyses historical cosmologies, modern UFOlogy, conspiracy cultures, and digital-era belief communities. Sources include recent peer-reviewed scholarship, folklore archives, government reports, and media artefacts. Analytical approaches combine discourse analysis of testimonies and online forums, comparative mythology, and thematic synthesis across sociology, psychology, and media theory. Findings reveal three continuities: first, alien narratives reproduce archetypal motifs of cosmic visitors and guides, functioning as modern myths; second, they address psychological and social needs by offering frameworks for coping with uncertainty, mistrust, and existential anxiety; and third, they are amplified by film, television, and participatory digital cultures, where UFOlogy circulates as both entertainment and folk religion. A key conclusion is the existence of an epistemological gap: while scientific institutions emphasise data and methodological rigour, popular belief validates alien presence through testimony, secrecy, and symbolic resonance. The study argues that aliens function as cultural mirrors, not scientific certainties, embodying societal anxieties while stimulating reflection on identity, otherness, and humanity’s place in the cosmos. Future research should explore corpus-linguistic patterns in alien discourse, psychological studies of belief formation, and the role of artificial intelligence in shaping extraterrestrial imagery.

Keywords: Extraterrestrial belief; UFOlogy; Myth-making; Conspiracy theories; Media studies; Sociology of religion; Cultural anthropology; Social memory; Digital folklore

1. Introduction

Human cultures have long populated the skies with nonhuman intelligences, ranging from astral deities and “star beings” to angels, demons, and, in modern times, extraterrestrials. In the twenty-first century, this imagination persists in a recognisably new key: a substantial minority of people now interpret some unidentified aerial phenomena (UAP/UFOs) as evidence of alien life, and majorities suspect that governments know more than they disclose. Recent polling in the United States, for example, found that nearly a third of adults regard UFOs as probably alien craft or life forms (29% in 2024), while roughly two-thirds believe authorities withhold information about UAPs (YouGov, 2024). These figures underscore a durable public appetite for extraterrestrial explanations even as official investigations emphasise more mundane possibilities and data gaps.

At the same time, the most authoritative scientific and defence reviews to date report no verified evidence of nonhuman technology operating on or around Earth. NASA’s (2023) Independent Study Team urged a “rigorous, evidence-based approach,” emphasising the need for calibrated sensors, standardised reporting, and open data to convert anecdotes into analysable signals; the panel found no credible indications of extraterrestrial origin in available cases. Similarly, the U.S. Department of Defence’s All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office (AARO, 2024) concluded in its Historical Record

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Report that decades of government files reveal no substantiation of alien craft, bodies, or crash-retrieval programs, with many iconic incidents explained by misidentifications, sensor artefacts, classified aerospace programs, or hoaxes.

This article addresses the central paradox that motivates contemporary scholarship: despite a continuing absence of empirical proof, “aliens among us” narratives flourish and adapt across eras and media ecosystems. The gap between institutional scepticism and widespread conviction is not merely epistemic; it is sociocultural. Beliefs about hidden extraterrestrials living alongside humans—variously framed as benevolent guides, covert hybrids, or malign shapeshifters—organise identities, communities, and worldviews. They also intersect with broader conspiratorial styles of reasoning that travel across domains (from politics to health and science) and correlate with distinct psychological dispositions and social conditions (Douglas, 2023; Pummerer et al., 2025; van Prooijen et al., 2023).

1.1. Objectives.

Framed as a narrative review and theoretical-historical synthesis, this study has three aims:

- To trace the historical and cultural roots of extraterrestrial belief by comparing ancient “sky-being” motifs with modern alien visitation narratives, while noting the perils of anachronism and the contested status of famous cases such as the Dogon “Sirius” knowledge (van Beek, 1991, 2004).
- To analyse sociological, psychological, and media-driven dimensions of “aliens among us” narratives, including conspiracy-adjacent dynamics, the role of “expert” figures within UFO cultures, and the influence of film/TV and participatory digital platforms (Douglas, 2023; Lipińska et al., 2025).
- To assess implications for science, religion, and society, clarifying how official UAP investigations (NASA, 2023; AARO, 2024) and public belief landscapes (Pew Research Centre, 2021; YouGov, 2024; Ipsos, 2023) interact—sometimes at cross-purposes—in shaping knowledge, trust, and meaning.

1.2. Research questions.

Four questions guide the review:

- **RQ1 (Genealogies):** How have ancient and early modern accounts of nonhuman intelligences—astral deities, angels/demons, “visitors”—been repurposed or reimagined in modern extraterrestrial discourse, and where are such genealogies speculative or contested (e.g., the Dogon/Sirius controversy; van Beek, 1991, 2004)?
- **RQ2 (Functions):** What social and psychological needs do “aliens among us” narratives fulfill—regarding wonder, control, community, or threat—within secular, technoscientific societies marked by uncertainty (Douglas, 2023; Pummerer et al., 2025)?
- **RQ3 (Mediations):** How do legacy media (e.g., *The X-Files*), reality programming (*Ancient Aliens*), and digital platforms (YouTube/TikTok/forums) construct participatory mythologies and authorise “experts,” thereby stabilising belief communities (Lipińska et al., 2025)?
- **RQ4 (Epistemologies):** What tensions arise between scientific evidentiary norms (NASA, 2023; AARO, 2024) and folk epistemologies (testimony, anomaly chasing), and how do these tensions feed perceptions of secrecy or disclosure?

1.3. Significance.

The study contributes to the sociology of religion, folklore studies, media/cultural studies, and science and technology studies (STS) in four ways. First, it re-situates extraterrestrial belief as a form of lived religion and cultural mythmaking rather than a simple factual error, drawing on classic perspectives such as Jung’s (1958) analysis of UFOs as modern myths, updated by contemporary psychology of conspiracy and appraisal models of belief consequences (Douglas, 2023; Pummerer et al., 2025). Second, it clarifies genealogies and boundaries, distinguishing responsibly between ancient cosmologies and modern ET claims to avoid “ancient alien” appropriations that erase indigenous creativity (van Beek, 2004). Third, it maps mediations—how cinematic tropes, influencer ecosystems, and emergent “experts” legitimate extraordinary claims (Lipińska et al., 2025). Fourth, it bridges science and culture, showing how official UAP work reframes public discourse around data quality, sensor bias, and methodological transparency rather than secrecy, even as publics continue to infer concealment when explanations are slow, technical, or classified (NASA, 2023; AARO, 2024; YouGov, 2024).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Ancient and Mythological Roots

In Mesopotamian tradition, the apkallū (“sages”) appear as liminal figures who transmit divine wisdom to early kings, often depicted in apotropaic iconography as fish-cloaked or bird-headed beings (Beck, 1988). Relatedly, the Anunna/Anunnaki were not extraterrestrials but a collective of deities, whose identity shifted across Sumerian and Akkadian texts—sometimes as a high council of gods, sometimes as underworld powers (Black & Green, 1992; Penn Museum/ORACC, 2019). Modern claims that the Anunnaki were “ancient astronauts” represent a contemporary pseudoscientific reinterpretation, not a view supported by cuneiform evidence (Turner & Turner, 2022).

In early Indian sources, the R̥gveda presents a sky-facing pantheon of gods, including Indra, Vāyu, Sūrya, and the Aśvins, who personify natural and celestial forces (Jamison & Brereton, 2014, 2020). Their aerial qualities reflect ritual cosmology and poetic metaphor, rather than technological or extraterrestrial origins (Oxford Reference, 2025). Philological precision is important here: terms like “chariots” or “fire” are hymnic tropes, not evidence of aerospace technology (Jamison & Brereton, 2014).

The Dogon of Mali have often been cited as holding advanced astronomical knowledge of Sirius B’s orbital cycle. Griaule and Dieterlen (1950) argued that this knowledge predated Western contact, a claim later popularised by Temple’s *The Sirius Mystery*. However, anthropologist Walter van Beek’s (1991, 2004) restudy found no consistent indigenous tradition matching these claims and suggested they may have resulted from researcher influence or post-contact transmission. This episode demonstrates how contested ethnographic data can be appropriated to reinforce “aliens among us” narratives.

In the Greco-Roman world, astral religion and astrology played a central role in structuring religious and philosophical thought. Planetary deities were integrated into imperial iconography, cosmology, and mystery cults such as Mithraism (Beck, 1988; Campion, 2018). Within the Mithraic mysteries, planetary symbolism organised initiation grades and temple iconography, demonstrating how the heavens functioned as a religious system of order and fate rather than as evidence of alien visitation (Oxford Classical Dictionary, 2025).

Taken together, these traditions demonstrate that ancient “sky beings” functioned as cosmic governors, natural personifications, or mythic protectors, rather than extraterrestrials. The modern framing of these beings as “aliens” is best understood as a reinterpretive leap in contemporary pseudoscience and popular culture, which retroactively imposes modern concerns onto ancient religious cosmologies (Turner & Turner, 2022).

2.2. Medieval & Early Modern Interpretations

2.2.1. Angels, demons, fairies, and changelings as precursors

Throughout medieval and early modern Europe, encounters with nonhuman intelligences were typically framed in terms of angels, demons, or fairies rather than extraterrestrials. Demonological traditions such as the incubus and succubus, spectral visitations, and nocturnal flights provided a vocabulary for intrusive experiences that resemble motifs later found in alien abduction narratives (Ginzburg, 1992; Levack, 2016). Folklore about changelings, the secret substitution of human infants by supernatural beings, mirrors contemporary themes of “hybridisation” and infiltration in extraterrestrial lore (Purkiss, 2000). Confessions such as those of Isobel Gowdie in seventeenth-century Scotland illustrate how visionary journeys and spirit contacts were articulated with extraordinary detail, providing early analogues to modern claims of otherworldly interaction (Wilby, 2010).

Scholars have also linked these experiences to universal psychophysiological states such as sleep paralysis, in which individuals report nocturnal assaults or the presence of strange beings. These states were interpreted in premodern Europe as demonic or fairy attacks, while today they are often reframed as alien abductions (Cox, 2015; Hufford, 1982). Such continuities highlight how culturally available mythic frameworks shape the interpretation of anomalous human experiences.

2.2.2. Theological debates on the plurality of worlds

Medieval theology also engaged in speculative debates about whether multiple inhabited worlds existed. The Condemnation of 1277 at the University of Paris explicitly affirmed God’s omnipotence to create many worlds, rejecting Aristotelian constraints on a single cosmos (Thijssen, 2003; Carroll, 2008/2023). Thinkers such as Nicole Oresme considered the possibility of multiple worlds, even if they concluded that only one was actualised (Kirschner, 2009).

Nicholas of Cusa further advanced this speculation, envisioning life on other stars as a natural extension of divine creativity (Miller, 2009).

By the seventeenth century, pluralism had moved from theological speculation to popular science. Works such as John Wilkins's *The Discovery of a World in the Moone* (1638), Bernard de Fontenelle's *Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds* (1686), and Christiaan Huygens's *Cosmotheoros* (1698) presented the idea of extraterrestrial life in accessible prose, legitimising the possibility of inhabited planets (Crowe, 1997; Dick, 1982). Recent scholarship emphasises that this pluralism was contested, with critics such as William Whewell in the nineteenth century resisting extraterrestrial speculation, showing the ongoing tension between theology, philosophy, and emerging science (Graney, 2024).

2.2.3. Witchcraft trials and spectral visitors as analogues

Witchcraft trials (1450–1750) created a juridical arena for narratives of supernatural intrusion. Testimonies frequently included reports of spectral assaults, night flights, and demonic encounters—motifs with striking parallels to later alien abduction accounts involving paralysis, transport, and bodily violation (Levack, 2016; Norton, 2002). The Salem witchcraft crisis (1692), for example, reveals how trauma, rumor, and spectral evidence shaped communal belief in hidden persecutors. These records inadvertently preserved templates of nonhuman interaction later repurposed in UFO abduction testimonies.

2.2.4. From demonology to alien demonology

Contemporary religious studies highlight how modern alien narratives often reproduce Christian demonological categories. Malevolent aliens are often interpreted as fallen angels or demonic entities, while benevolent “space brothers” are likened to angelic messengers. Partridge (2004) argues that modern “alien demonology” is less a break from Christian tradition than a reworking of familiar religious tropes within a technological framework. This continuity explains why notions of possession, infiltration, and deception remain central to “aliens among us” narratives.

2.3. Modern UFO Narratives (20th Century)

2.3.1. Roswell (1947) and Cold War anxieties

The Roswell incident of July 1947 is often regarded as the starting point of modern UFO mythology. Initial press releases claimed the recovery of a “flying disc,” but the U.S. Army quickly retracted the statement, attributing the debris to a weather balloon. Decades later, official reports concluded that the material came from Project MOGUL, a classified balloon surveillance program, and that alleged “alien bodies” were likely misremembered military test dummies (U.S. Air Force, 1994, 1997). Nonetheless, Roswell became a cultural touchstone, reflecting Cold War fears of secrecy, technological threat, and government concealment (Bartholomew & Howard, 1998).

2.3.2. The Betty and Barney Hill abduction case

The 1961 case of Betty and Barney Hill was the first widely publicised alien abduction narrative in the United States. Their story, featuring “missing time,” medical examinations, and a star map, was popularised through John G. Fuller's *The Interrupted Journey* (1966). Scholars note that the Hill case established a template for subsequent abduction reports, particularly motifs of nocturnal paralysis and invasive procedures (Clancy, 2005; McNally & Clancy, 2005). Psychological studies suggest that experiences of sleep paralysis, false memory formation, and cultural suggestion may help explain how such accounts are internalised as extraterrestrial encounters (Clancy, 2005; McNally & Clancy, 2005).

2.3.3. Government secrecy and disclosure movements

During the Cold War, UFOs became entangled with broader anxieties about secrecy and surveillance. By the late twentieth century, “disclosure” movements demanded government transparency on alleged crash retrievals and cover-ups. More recently, declassified documents and official reports have reframed UFOs as “unidentified anomalous phenomena” (UAP). The Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI, 2021, 2023) acknowledged unexplained cases but emphasised limited and low-quality data. The Department of Defence released declassified Navy UAP videos in 2020 to increase transparency (U.S. Department of Defence, 2020). NASA's (2023) independent review similarly found no evidence of extraterrestrial craft but recommended standardised reporting and open data. The All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office (AARO, 2024) further concluded that decades of U.S. files provided no substantiated evidence of alien technology, attributing many incidents to misidentifications, sensor errors, or classified terrestrial programs.

2.3.4. SETI and NASA's role in legitimising the search

While UFOlogy often centres on secrecy and personal testimony, the scientific search for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI) follows a different trajectory. The SETI Institute frames the search as hypothesis-driven astronomy, using radio and optical telescopes to detect potential technosignatures (SETI Institute, n.d.). NASA has also supported astrobiology and life-detection research, emphasising transparency and methodological rigour (NASA, 2023). The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2021) identified the characterisation of Earth-like exoplanets as a research priority, legitimising the search for biosignatures and technosignatures within mainstream science. Together, these initiatives distinguish the scientific pursuit of extraterrestrial life from cultural UFO belief systems, underscoring divergent epistemologies of “proof.”

2.4. Contemporary Belief Systems

2.4.1. New Age “star seeds” and hybrid theories

In the late twentieth century, UFO narratives began to converge with New Age spirituality, producing belief systems that framed extraterrestrials not as external invaders but as spiritual guides and cosmic kin. The “star seed” movement holds that some humans are reincarnated extraterrestrial souls sent to assist Earth’s transformation. This belief aligns with broader New Age themes of ascension, vibrational frequency, and planetary awakening (Partridge, 2004). Scholars have noted how such ideas blur the boundary between religion and popular culture, creating hybrid cosmologies that reframe aliens as benevolent, salvific forces (Hanegraaff, 2013). More recent ethnographic research documents communities in North America and online platforms where individuals self-identify as “star seeds,” drawing authority from channelled messages, personal testimonies, and spiritual practices (Aupers & Houtman, 2010; Demars, 2023). Hybridisation theories extend these motifs by claiming that aliens are engaged in genetic programs, producing “hybrid children” who will mediate between species. These narratives resonate with folkloric changeling motifs while adapting them to technological and genetic discourses (Bullard, 2010).

2.4.2. Reptilian shapeshifters and conspiracy theories

Another strand of contemporary belief depicts aliens as deceptive infiltrators rather than spiritual allies. The most prominent is the “reptilian” hypothesis popularised by conspiracy theorists such as David Icke, who asserts that shapeshifting reptilian elites secretly control human institutions. Scholars interpret such narratives as symbolic projections of political distrust, globalisation anxiety, and racialised otherness (Barkun, 2013). The reptilian myth serves as a modern form of demonology, recycling older motifs of possession and hidden infiltration while translating them into political-conspiratorial registers (Partridge, 2004). Its spread through digital subcultures illustrates how UFOlogy and conspiracy thinking increasingly overlap, producing what Barkun (2013) calls a “conspiracy milieu” where supernatural, political, and pseudoscientific claims reinforce each other.

2.4.3. Online communities, TikTok, and YouTube UFOlogy

Digital platforms have radically reshaped how UFO beliefs circulate. Online forums such as Reddit’s r/UFOs, video platforms like YouTube, and TikTok creators amplify personal testimonies, alleged footage, and speculative theories. Lipińska et al. (2025) demonstrate how “expert figures” in these online communities acquire authority not through institutional science, but through charisma, narrative coherence, and visibility. Social media algorithms prioritise sensational, emotionally engaging content, allowing alien conspiracy and abduction narratives to reach massive audiences quickly (Zuckerman, 2023). The participatory nature of these platforms fosters what Jenkins (2006) calls “convergence culture,” where fans, believers, and skeptics co-produce the UFO discourse by remixing testimonies, memes, and commentary. Recent analyses highlight that digital UFOlogy is less about coherent doctrine than about maintaining interpretive communities that thrive on ambiguity, mystery, and the affective thrill of “what if” (Lemiere, 2022).

Taken together, contemporary belief systems reflect a diversification of alien narratives into spiritualized, conspiratorial, and participatory digital forms. These variations show that the “aliens among us” motif is not static but dynamically reshaped by cultural anxieties, spiritual yearnings, and media ecologies.

2.5. Media and Popular Culture

2.5.1. The X-Files, Men in Black, and Ancient Aliens

Television and film have played a critical role in shaping the public's imagination about extraterrestrials living secretly among humans. *The X-Files* (1993–2002; 2016–2018) blended conspiracy thriller tropes with paranormal investigations, popularising the idea of hidden alien–government alliances and reinforcing a cultural hermeneutic of

suspicion encapsulated in the phrase “trust no one” (Mittell, 2015). Scholars argue that this series helped embed UFOlogy into mainstream discourse by presenting secrecy and infiltration as narratively plausible (Barkun, 2013). By contrast, *Men in Black* (1997–2019) rendered cohabitation humorous and bureaucratic, depicting aliens as everyday figures integrated into human society while policed by a secretive agency. Such portrayals reframed anxieties about immigration, globalisation, and surveillance into entertaining, manageable narratives (Booker, 2006; Telotte, 2001). The History Channel’s *Ancient Aliens* (2009–present) advanced a more speculative approach, suggesting that extraterrestrials influenced human civilisations. Scholars of religion and archaeology critique this as pseudoscience, arguing that it undermines indigenous agency by attributing cultural achievements to alien intervention (Feder, 2020; Partridge, 2004).

2.5.2. Film and video-game portrayals reinforcing alien cohabitation.

Cinema and gaming extend these themes through interactive and immersive storytelling. Films such as *District 9* (2009) and *They Live* (1988) portray aliens as marginalised populations or deceptive infiltrators, reflecting social anxieties about race, class, and governance. Comedies like *Paul* (2011) normalise extraterrestrials as quirky companions, while franchises like *The World’s End* (2013) imagine alien assimilation as a metaphor for conformity. Video games further reinforce these tropes by allowing players to negotiate interspecies diplomacy or conflict, normalising the idea of alien–human coexistence through simulated governance structures (Booker, 2006; Telotte, 2001).

2.5.3. Meme culture and alien virality online

Digital platforms have amplified UFO discourse by turning it into participatory culture. Memes such as the widely circulated “I am not saying it was aliens, but ...” macro from *Ancient Aliens* exemplify how ironic humour and speculation intertwine, allowing users to oscillate between belief and parody (Shifman, 2013). Scholars note that authority in online UFO subcultures emerges less from scientific expertise and more from performance, charisma, and algorithmic amplification (Jenkins, 2006; Phillips & Milner, 2017). As trust in institutions wanes, platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Reddit promote sensational UFO narratives through virality, embedding extraterrestrial belief within the broader landscape of digital mistrust and conspiratorial thinking (Zuckerman, 2023).

2.6. Psychological and Sociological Dimensions

2.6.1. Collective trauma, memory, and projection

Psychological research has long noted the role of memory, trauma, and projection in shaping narratives of alien encounters. Abduction accounts frequently include descriptions of paralysis, invasive procedures, and altered states of consciousness, which scholars link to sleep paralysis, post-traumatic stress symptoms, and culturally mediated memory construction (McNally & Clancy, 2005). Collective trauma, such as Cold War anxieties about nuclear annihilation or post-9/11 fears of surveillance, has also been projected onto alien imagery, with extraterrestrials embodying anxieties about domination, secrecy, and loss of control (Dean, 1998; Peebles, 2022). In this sense, “aliens among us” serve as psychological placeholders for diffuse fears that are difficult to articulate directly, encoding both individual vulnerability and broader cultural insecurities.

2.6.2. Belief in aliens as a coping mechanism for existential uncertainty

Belief in extraterrestrial cohabitation also functions as a coping mechanism in the face of existential uncertainty. Social psychologists argue that conspiracy-related beliefs, including UFOlogy, often provide a sense of order and agency in environments perceived as unstable (Douglas, 2023; Pummerer et al., 2025). By positing hidden actors, benevolent “space brothers” or malevolent reptilian elites, alien narratives offer explanatory frameworks that re-enchant a secularised, technoscientific society. This helps individuals manage uncertainty about human survival, cosmic solitude, or the integrity of political institutions (van Prooijen et al., 2023). In religious studies terms, aliens fulfil roles once occupied by angels or demons, offering protection, judgment, or punishment, thereby providing continuity between traditional religious cosmologies and contemporary secular-spiritual imaginaries (Partridge, 2004).

2.6.3. Alien narratives as modern myth-making

From a cultural-historical perspective, alien narratives can be read as modern myth stories that articulate collective values, anxieties, and hopes through symbolic figures. Jung (1958/2009) famously argued that flying saucers operate as “technological mandalas,” embodying archetypal patterns of wholeness during times of crisis. Contemporary scholars extend this reading, showing how UFO beliefs have become part of “mythologies of the present,” where media, folklore, and science converge to narrate humanity’s place in the cosmos (Peebles, 2022; Denzler, 2023). Myth-making in this context does not denote falsehood but rather the symbolic work of crafting meaning under conditions of uncertainty.

Digital culture amplifies this process: viral memes, livestreamed UFO hearings, and TikTok abduction testimonies contribute to an ongoing mythos in which aliens are simultaneously playful, terrifying, and profoundly meaningful (Lipińska et al., 2025; Zuckerman, 2023).

Taken together, the psychological and sociological dimensions of “aliens among us” show how extraterrestrial narratives persist not despite a lack of evidence but because they provide powerful cultural scripts for processing trauma, negotiating uncertainty, and re-enchanting the modern imagination.

3. Theoretical Framework

The persistence of narratives about extraterrestrials “living among us” can be illuminated through a range of theoretical lenses drawn from cultural history, sociology of religion, folklore studies, and media theory. These frameworks help situate alien beliefs not merely as factual claims but as cultural processes of meaning-making, symbolic negotiation, and social imagination.

3.1. Social Memory Theory

Social memory theory emphasises how groups remember, transmit, and reinterpret collective experiences across generations (Assmann, 2011; Olick & Robbins, 1998). Applied to alien narratives, it explains why motifs of sky beings, abduction, or infiltration remain resilient even when empirical verification is absent. Just as medieval demonological encounters were archived through court records and sermons, modern alien abduction accounts and UFO reports circulate via books, documentaries, and digital platforms, creating repositories of collective “memory” that reinforce belief. This perspective highlights that what matters is not empirical proof, but rather the social circulation and cultural durability of such memories (Peebles, 2022).

3.2. Myth and Symbol Theory

Myth and symbol theory, associated with Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell, interprets recurring motifs as archetypal structures that communicate universal human concerns. Eliade (1959/1998) argued that myths orient human beings in a cosmic order, while Campbell (1949/2008) saw archetypes such as the hero or the guide as recurring across cultures. Within this framework, alien narratives operate as modern myths, encoding quests for transcendence, fears of invasion, and desires for salvation. UFOs and aliens function as symbolic stand-ins for the sacred—embodying both dread and hope in a secularised world. Jung’s (1958/2009) reading of flying saucers as “technological mandalas” exemplifies this approach, portraying them as archetypes of wholeness projected into the skies during periods of crisis.

3.3. Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial frameworks highlight how alien narratives reproduce anxieties about race, colonisation, and cultural “otherness.” Aliens often serve as metaphors for the foreigner or coloniser, whether depicted as invaders (War of the Worlds) or as marginalised communities (*District 9*). The recurrent theme of reptilian shapeshifters infiltrating political elites reflects longstanding tropes of hidden enemies, racialised suspicion, and fears of cultural replacement (Barkun, 2013). From a critical perspective, shows like *Ancient Aliens* erase indigenous agency by attributing monumental architecture to extraterrestrials, perpetuating colonial hierarchies of knowledge (Feder, 2020). Thus, postcolonial analysis situates aliens as symbolic “others” that mirror unresolved tensions around empire, race, and global inequality.

3.4. Media and Discourse Theory

Media and discourse theories examine how communication systems construct, circulate, and stabilise alien beliefs. Jenkins’ (2006) theory of convergence culture explains how UFO narratives thrive in participatory digital spaces where users co-create stories, memes, and testimonies. Media studies scholars demonstrate how The X-Files, Men in Black, and YouTube UFOlogy communities serve as discursive arenas where the presence of aliens is dramatised, contested, and normalised (Mittell, 2015; Lipińska et al., 2025). Discourse analysis reveals how testimony, imagery, and algorithmic amplification lend UFOlogy a semblance of legitimacy, even in the absence of empirical verification. This perspective underscores that aliens “among us” are as much a media effect as they are a metaphysical proposition.

3.5. Sociology of Religion

Finally, the sociology of religion frames aliens as functional equivalents to gods, angels, or demons. Partridge (2004) argues that malevolent alien archetypes inherit traits from Christian demonology, while benevolent “space brothers” resemble angelic guides. From this view, UFO religions, New Age star seed movements, and abduction testimonies function as new religious movements, providing cosmologies, rituals, and existential meaning (Aupers & Houtman,

2010). Belief in aliens thus performs the same cultural work as traditional religion: explaining human origins, offering moral lessons, and situating humanity within a larger cosmic drama.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

This study adopts a narrative review design with an interdisciplinary synthesis. A narrative review is appropriate because the phenomenon of extraterrestrial belief spans multiple disciplines, folklore, sociology, psychology, media studies, and religious studies, without a single methodological standard. Unlike systematic reviews, which rely on fixed inclusion/exclusion criteria and meta-analysis, narrative reviews allow for interpretive synthesis across heterogeneous literatures (Snyder, 2019). This design supports the goal of mapping how alien “living among us” narratives evolve across historical periods and cultural registers.

4.2. Sources of Data

The review draws from several categories of sources:

- Peer-reviewed academic research (with priority given to publications from 2022–2025) in sociology of religion, conspiracy psychology, media studies, and folklore.
- Foundational texts in comparative mythology and the study of new religious movements (e.g., Eliade, Jung, Partridge).
- Folklore collections and ethnographies documenting mythic beings (e.g., demons, changelings, star beings) that function as precursors to extraterrestrial motifs.
- UFOlogy and abduction studies, including both academic analyses (e.g., Bullard, Clancy) and critical government reports (e.g., NASA, AARO, ODNI).
- Media content films, television series (*The X-Files*, *Ancient Aliens*, *Men in Black*), video games, and digital culture artefacts (memes, YouTube channels, TikTok testimonies)—to assess how alien narratives are represented and reinterpreted.
- This multi-source approach reflects the study’s concern not only with “what” people believe but also with how belief is mediated, circulated, and legitimised.

4.3. Analytical Tools

Three analytical strategies guide the review:

- Discourse analysis – Testimonies, abduction accounts, government reports, and online forums (e.g., Reddit, TikTok, YouTube) are analyzed as discursive sites where authority, credibility, and experience are constructed. This follows Foucauldian insights into discourse as a system of knowledge and power (Foucault, 1972/2010). In this context, abduction narratives and disclosure testimonies are not treated as simple factual claims, but rather as performative texts that negotiate legitimacy.
- Comparative mythology – Alien narratives are examined against older traditions of sky beings, angels, demons, and changelings. This method highlights continuities and recontextualizations across time, showing how familiar mythic motifs are translated into technological and extraterrestrial idioms. Drawing on Eliade (1959/1998) and Campbell (1949/2008), the analysis situates aliens as modern mythological figures performing the same symbolic work as traditional deities and spirits.
- Thematic synthesis – Across sociology, psychology, and media studies, themes such as trauma, mistrust, transcendence, secrecy, and hybridity are extracted and synthesised. This method allows the integration of insights from disparate disciplines into a coherent interpretive framework (Thomas & Harden, 2008). For example, conspiracy psychology’s focus on epistemic uncertainty (Douglas, 2023; Pummerer et al., 2025) is synthesised with religious studies’ framing of aliens as functional analogues of angels (Partridge, 2004) to highlight how extraterrestrial narratives meet social and existential needs.

4.4. Ethical and Epistemological Considerations

Because belief in aliens intersects with deeply held worldviews, the analysis proceeds with epistemic humility. The goal is not to adjudicate the ontological reality of extraterrestrials but to explain why belief in their presence persists and evolves. In line with cultural anthropology and sociology of religion, all testimonies and narratives are treated as meaningful cultural artifacts, regardless of empirical status. This stance avoids pathologising believers while situating their claims within broader cultural, political, and technological contexts.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1. Aliens as Mythic Continuities

One of the strongest findings of this review is the persistence of mythic continuities that connect ancient “sky beings” to contemporary extraterrestrial narratives. Across civilisations, humans have imagined contact with nonhuman intelligences who descend from or inhabit the heavens. Mesopotamian traditions of the Apkallu, semi-divine sages sent from the gods to impart wisdom, mirror the contemporary motif of “aliens as teachers of humanity” (Dalley, 2000). Similarly, Vedic hymns describe Devas traversing the skies in luminous vehicles (vimanas). At the same time, Mesoamerican myths frame Quetzalcoatl as a feathered serpent descending from the heavens to bring knowledge and order (Townsend, 2009). These ancient figures embody the archetype of cosmic visitors bearing transformative power, a pattern that modern UFO narratives replicate in the form of benevolent “space brothers” or technologically advanced beings offering salvation.

The cross-cultural recurrence of celestial visitors suggests that alien narratives are not entirely new but represent modern reconfigurations of enduring archetypes. Joseph Campbell’s (1949/2008) work on mythic archetypes highlights the universality of the “helper from beyond,” while Mircea Eliade (1959/1998) emphasises the centrality of vertical transcendence beings descending from the sky to renew the world. In modern contexts, the same symbolic grammar is applied to extraterrestrials: UFO contactees often interpret aliens as guardians of peace, intervening to prevent nuclear catastrophe, echoing ancient myths of gods protecting humanity from cosmic disorder (Bullard, 2010; Partridge, 2004).

Psychological and symbolic readings reinforce this continuity. Jung (1958/2009) interpreted UFOs as “technological mandalas,” archetypal symbols of wholeness projected into a space-age sky. More recent cultural studies argue that aliens function as “myths of the modern age,” encoding both awe at technological progress and anxiety about its unintended consequences (Denzler, 2023; Peebles, 2022). This demonstrates how ancient archetypes of celestial descent and guidance are recycled in modern idioms: gods become extraterrestrials, chariots become spacecraft. Heavenly revelations become abduction testimonies or New Age star-seed teachings.

In short, the findings suggest that alien narratives thrive not because they represent a break with tradition, but because they draw continuity from deeply embedded cross-cultural archetypes of cosmic visitors. These continuities provide symbolic stability, allowing new generations to rearticulate timeless concerns such as knowledge, survival, and transcendence through the idiom of the extraterrestrial.

5.2. Social and Psychological Functions

Alien narratives also perform significant social and psychological functions, particularly in late modern societies where traditional religious frameworks have weakened but existential concerns remain.

5.2.1. *Filling spiritual voids in secular societies*

In many Western contexts, declining adherence to institutional religion has created what scholars describe as a “spiritual marketplace,” where individuals seek meaning outside conventional belief systems (Hanegraaff, 2013). Within this milieu, extraterrestrial narratives offer cosmologies of purpose and transcendence that parallel older religious frameworks. Abduction accounts often include themes of revelation, moral teaching, or transformation, functioning much like visionary experiences in mystical traditions (Bullard, 2010). New Age movements reinterpret aliens as benevolent star beings or guides, providing narratives of cosmic kinship and destiny (Aupers & Houtman, 2010). From a sociological perspective, these stories help to re-enchant a disenchanting world, offering believers a sense of connection to something larger than humanity itself (Partridge, 2004).

5.2.2. *Projection of collective fears*

At the same time, alien narratives externalise and dramatise cultural anxieties. During the Cold War, UFO sightings were often interpreted as projections of nuclear fear and anxieties about state secrecy (Dean, 1998). In contemporary contexts, aliens are frequently imagined as colonisers, echoing the traumas of imperialism and subjugation (Denzler, 2023). The reptilian-shapeshifter conspiracy, for example, projects fears of hidden surveillance and elite domination, turning extraterrestrials into metaphors for opaque political power (Barkun, 2013). Similarly, apocalyptic narratives of alien invasion dramatise ecological collapse and technological risk, allowing societies to process otherwise overwhelming anxieties through symbolic storytelling (Douglas, 2023; van Prooijen et al., 2023).

Psychologists note that belief in hidden forces, whether conspiratorial or extraterrestrial, helps individuals cope with epistemic uncertainty and a sense of lack of control (Pummerer et al., 2025). In this sense, alien narratives simultaneously provide comfort (cosmic guardianship) and serve as a warning (cosmic threat), occupying the same dual role as angels and demons in earlier religious traditions.

5.3. Media and Digital Reinforcement

5.3.1. *Hollywood and television are reinforcing the belief*

Film and television have played a crucial role in normalising and reinforcing alien cohabitation narratives. Blockbusters such as *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *E.T.* (1982), and *Men in Black* (1997–2019) presented aliens not only as threats but also as neighbours, allies, and bureaucratic subjects. Scholars argue that such representations transform the extraordinary into the ordinary, embedding extraterrestrials into the cultural imagination as “hidden but integrated” presences (Booker, 2006; Telotte, 2001). Television shows like *The X-Files* (1993–2018) further institutionalised suspicion of government secrecy while suggesting that aliens move undetected among humans. These media narratives shape interpretive frameworks: audiences are primed to read ambiguous lights in the sky or unexplained events through alien tropes already familiar from popular culture (Mittell, 2015). As Partridge (2004) notes, UFO religions and conspiracy subcultures often draw explicitly on cinematic imagery, demonstrating that Hollywood does not merely reflect belief but actively co-produces modern alien mythologies.

5.3.2. *Internet forums and TikTok are creating participatory mythologies*

Digital platforms have transformed UFO discourse from top-down storytelling into participatory myth-making. Forums like Reddit’s r/UFOs and dedicated Discord servers function as collaborative archives where believers, skeptics, and “experts” debate sightings and abduction reports. Rather than centralised authorities, legitimacy in these spaces derives from narrative coherence, community endorsement, and performative expertise (Lipińska et al., 2025). On TikTok and YouTube, creators blend alleged footage, eyewitness testimony, and conspiratorial speculation into short-form viral media. Memes such as the ubiquitous *Ancient Aliens* reaction image allow users to oscillate between irony and belief, creating what Shifman (2013) calls “memetic polysemy,” where multiple meanings coexist in the same artefact.

These platforms accelerate the viral circulation of alien narratives, particularly by exploiting algorithmic logics that prioritise sensational and affectively charged content (Phillips & Milner, 2017; Zuckerman, 2023). As a result, alien cohabitation beliefs are no longer confined to UFO subcultures but spread widely through participatory remix culture. Digital UFOlogy thus becomes a folk religion of the internet age, where symbols, testimonies, and conspiracies are co-created and sustained through networked publics.

5.4. Tensions Between Science & Belief

5.4.1. *SETI’s silence vs. popular insistence on encounters*

A central tension in the study of extraterrestrial belief lies between the silence of scientific searches and the insistence of popular cultures on lived encounters. Since the mid-twentieth century, the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) has employed systematic, peer-reviewed methods to detect technosignatures (Tarter, 2001; SETI Institute, n.d.). Despite decades of listening, SETI has produced no confirmed detections, leading to the so-called “Great Silence.” By contrast, abduction communities, disclosure activists, and online forums continue to generate a steady flow of testimonies and alleged sightings, often interpreted as proof of alien presence among us (Clancy, 2005; Lipińska et al., 2025). This divergence highlights a fundamental clash of epistemic standards: while science requires replicable data, cultural UFOlogy prioritises testimony, experience, and scepticism regarding secrecy.

5.4.2. *The “epistemological gap” between scientific evidence and cultural proof*

This gap reflects what scholars refer to as an “epistemological divide” between scientific and cultural modes of proof (Peebles, 2022). For institutions like NASA and the All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office (AARO), the absence of verifiable evidence translates into cautious agnosticism: unexplained phenomena are treated as data gaps rather than confirmations of alien life (NASA, 2023; AARO, 2024). However, for many in the public, the very persistence of mystery—bolstered by government secrecy, ambiguous videos, or suppressed testimonies serves as cultural validation (Zuckerman, 2023). In other words, where scientists see “not enough data,” communities of belief see confirmation by omission.

The symbolic work of alien narratives exacerbates this epistemological gap. Folklorists and sociologists note that aliens function less as empirical entities than as cultural myths embodying human fears and hopes (Denzler, 2023; Jung,

1958/2009). Thus, the continued insistence on alien encounters despite scientific silence is not simply irrational but reflects the durability of myth as a mode of cultural truth. Widespread belief in extraterrestrials persists because it addresses existential, psychological, and social needs that scientific data alone cannot fulfil.

5.5. Implications for Society

5.5.1. *Aliens as tools for thinking about “the other”*

Alien narratives offer a symbolic framework for navigating difference and alterity. In cultural terms, extraterrestrials function as ultimate “others”, against which human identity is negotiated. Postcolonial scholars argue that depictions of aliens as invaders, hybrids, or hidden infiltrators often mirror anxieties about immigration, race, and globalisation (Barkun, 2013; Denzler, 2023). Conversely, benevolent alien figures such as the “space brothers” of contactee religions or the star beings of New Age cosmologies serve as metaphors for transcending parochial identities and embracing a cosmic community (Aupers & Houtman, 2010). In both registers, aliens enable societies to rehearse scenarios of inclusion, exclusion, and transformation, offering a mirror for thinking about humanity’s place among difference.

5.5.2. *Conspiratorial thinking and erosion of trust in institutions*

The persistence of alien belief also has implications for democratic institutions and public trust. As recent research shows, conspiratorial interpretations of UFO secrecy correlate with broader patterns of political mistrust and epistemic polarisation (Douglas, 2023; Pummerer et al., 2025; van Prooijen et al., 2023). When official silence or scientific caution is reframed as a deliberate cover-up, aliens become part of a conspiracy ecosystem that delegitimises governments, media, and science. This erosion of trust can have spillover effects, with UFO conspiracy theories travelling into domains such as health misinformation or political extremism (Zuckerman, 2023). Thus, alien narratives are not merely whimsical myths but active participants in the dynamics of mistrust that shape civic life.

5.5.3. *Potential for intercultural dialogue about human identity*

At the same time, alien narratives carry constructive potential by prompting reflection on human identity and intercultural understanding. By imagining contact with radically different intelligences, societies are invited to reconsider what it means to be human, much as earlier myths did when situating humanity within divine or cosmic orders (Jung, 1958/2009; Peebles, 2022). In intercultural contexts, the alien motif can serve as a bridge for dialogue. Rather than reinforcing exclusion, it can foster empathy and humility by foregrounding shared vulnerabilities in the face of cosmic vastness. As Denzler (2023) argues, UFOs and aliens become “crisis myths,” forcing societies to confront their fragility while opening space for reimagined solidarities.

Taken together, the implications of extraterrestrial belief highlight a paradox: while alien narratives can erode trust through conspiracy thinking, they also provide a cosmological canvas for rethinking difference, community, and planetary identity. Their persistence ensures that debates about aliens remain debates about ourselves.

6. Conclusion

This review has examined the cultural, psychological, and sociological dimensions of extraterrestrial narratives, focusing on the motif of aliens “living among us.” Across historical periods, the analysis demonstrates a continuity of archetypes: ancient sky beings, medieval demons and changelings, and modern UFO occupants all embody recurring symbolic functions. These figures serve as cultural mirrors, reflecting humanity’s shifting anxieties, aspirations, and cosmological self-understanding rather than representing empirical evidence of extraterrestrial life.

The findings highlight three key insights. First, alien narratives thrive because they perform social and psychological work: filling spiritual voids in secularised societies, externalising fears of colonisation, surveillance, and apocalypse, and offering frameworks for coping with uncertainty. Second, media and digital culture amplify these narratives, creating participatory mythologies that blend entertainment, conspiracy, and folk religion. Third, tensions between science and belief reveal an enduring epistemological gap: while institutions such as NASA and SETI operate within rigorous evidentiary standards, popular culture validates an alien presence through testimony, secrecy, and mythic resonance.

In this light, aliens are best understood not as scientific certainties but as myth-making devices of modernity. They embody the cultural grammar through which societies negotiate questions of identity, authority, and survival. As mirrors of human hopes and fears, extraterrestrials dramatise the dilemmas of late modern life: mistrust in institutions, longing for transcendence, and confrontation with radical otherness.

Future research should expand in three directions. First, corpus linguistics of alien narratives could systematically trace how language about extraterrestrials evolves across media, from folklore to Reddit forums. Second, psychological studies on believers could deepen understanding of how abduction testimonies and conspiracy adherence intersect with trauma, memory, and epistemic needs. Third, the role of AI in generating alien imagery, from deepfakes to art, warrants study as these tools reshape visual myth-making and blur the lines between imagination and evidence.

Ultimately, the persistence of aliens “among us” underscores that the question is not whether extraterrestrials live here but why humans continue to narrate them as if they do. The answer lies in culture: aliens are our most enduring cosmic others, projecting our anxieties and aspirations back to us in the form of modern myth.

Compliance with ethical standards

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