

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Santa Barbara

Sometimes the Cure is Part of the Disease: Possession, Abduction, and Spirituality in Mental  
Health Treatments

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Religious Studies

by

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June 2022

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## Abstract

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This paper explores the topics of alien abduction and jinn possession in the context of modern medicine. I contrast the different kinds of treatments that victims of abduction and possession seek out, which include modern psychiatry, hypnotic therapy, and traditional religious ritual. According to their own testimonies, patients who feel believed and understood are better able to heal, and analysis of treatment efficacies supports this conclusion as well. Accordingly, I argue that the most effective treatments for those who claim to have been possessed or abducted are those that accept the ontological reality of the abduction or possession experience.

Some psychiatrists have suggested incorporating traditional Islamic healing rituals into clinical treatments for Muslims suffering from jinn possession. I argue that mental health professionals should similarly respect the religious dimensions of abduction experiences and understand that such experiences are not indicative of psychopathology. In the final section, I explore how the fields of psychiatry and psychology are already incorporating elements of spirituality into their treatments, and suggest that traditional treatments for possession and abduction provide potential frameworks for invoking spirituality in future treatments for mental health.

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## Introduction

In 1967, American social psychiatrist John G. Kennedy published an analysis of rural Egyptian *zar* ceremonies, an elaborate ritual that provides relief for people possessed by jinn. Noting the therapeutic value these ceremonies impart for those who exhibit symptoms of mental illness as well as for people who seem perfectly sound, he seems almost bewildered by the ceremony's effectiveness, stating that its methods "may well be more effective techniques than most of the present-day Western psychotherapy."<sup>1</sup> He concludes that the theatrics, emotional arousal, and symbolically-charged aura of the *zar* room might tap into a healing force not recognized by Western medicine. He writes: "Research might reveal that the emotional therapies discovered by so-called primitive peoples with their 'irrational' belief systems have greater power to cope with some of the still dimly understood forces of the human psyche than do many of the methods still unable to escape from assumptions inherent in the model of rational man."<sup>2</sup>

In the years since Kennedy's encounter with *zar*, other scholars have studied how traditional treatments that incorporate what psychiatrist Carlos Alberto Seguin calls "extra-scientific beliefs" are able to successfully treat and even cure ailments that modern Western medicine labels as mental illness.<sup>3</sup> Seguin, who observed the competency of native Peruvian healers in treating alcoholism, argued that the mechanisms of what he termed "folklore

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<sup>1</sup>John G. Kennedy, "Nubian Zar Ceremonies as Psychotherapy," *Human Organization* 26, no. 4 (1967): 194.

<sup>2</sup> Kennedy, "Nubian Zar Ceremonies as Psychotherapy," 193.

<sup>3</sup> Carlos Alberto Seguin, "What Folklore Psychotherapy Can Teach Us," *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics* 24, no. 4/6 (1974): 295.

psychiatry” could not only “widen our therapeutic horizon, but—and perhaps I am saying the very same thing in different words—it would enlarge our capacity for human comprehension.”<sup>4</sup> Stanley Krippner, a psychologist and specialist on shamanism, already sees an overlap between traditional treatments and modern psychology. Comparing shamans and other traditional healers to modern medical professionals, he argues that Western psychotherapy “has its roots in shamanism, and needs to explore avenues of potential cooperation with a model of healing that still contains wise insights and practical applications.”<sup>5</sup> According to these scholars, who are also psychiatrists and psychologists, traditional healing practices aim to accomplish similar goals as modern-day mental health treatments and are able to do so with sometimes even greater efficacy than their Western counterparts.

This thesis aims to contribute to research on the overlap between mental health treatments and religious ritual and experience by comparing the phenomena of jinn possession and alien abduction in the context of modern psychiatry and psychology. I analyze examples of traditional treatments operating outside of typical medical paradigms that Muslim faith healers and abduction researchers use to treat those who have been

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 301. Seguin differentiates between “ethnopsychiatry,” which studies traditional healers operating within a milieu in which their treatments represent the dominant culture, and folklore psychiatry, which “concerns itself with the study of beliefs, ideas, and practices related to psychiatric conditions and their treatment as maintained by popular tradition, apart and against what is accepted by the dominant culture into which they appear” (294).

<sup>5</sup> Stanley Krippner, “Shamans as Healers, Counselors, and Psychotherapists,” *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* 31, no. 2 (2012): 78.

possessed or abducted. I posit that possession and abduction, as types of religious experience, merit respect and further analysis rather than simple pathologization.

I seek to answer the questions: How might we better understand jinn possession when we compare it to abduction? Do these experiences, despite their sometimes-debilitating effects, ultimately benefit those who have them? Can modern medicine learn from traditional treatment methods for possession and abduction in order to better address the “still dimly understood forces of the human psyche” that Western psychotherapy, in Kennedy’s estimation, overlooks?

The following analysis begins with a brief explanation of jinn and the phenomenon of jinn possession. Next, it examines traditional treatment modalities for possession, namely *zar* ceremonies and the administrations of a *raqi* healer. It then examines how modern psychiatry categorizes and treats jinn possession. The subsequent section on alien abduction begins with a brief explanation of abduction history, examines the role of hypnosis in the production of abduction narratives, and then looks at how modern psychology understands and treats abduction. I demonstrate that abduction functions as a religious experience and should be understood as such by modern mental health practitioners. In the final section, I explore the possibilities of incorporating spirituality into mental health treatments and present ways that psychology and psychiatry are already witnessing the impact of spirituality in certain forms of therapy.

To be clear, I am not asserting the ontological reality of jinn, aliens, or other nonhuman entities in a general sense. To do so would require evidence and skills that I do not currently possess. Rather, I argue that, for those who are possessed or abducted, the experience is very real. Mental health professionals who discount such beliefs as mere

delusions are dismissing experiences which, for some people, constitute part of their lived beliefs and realities. To do so is not only disrespectful to their patients, but damaging to their own ability to help provide effective care for people who have had possession or abduction experiences.

### *Contribution of this paper*

My research builds upon previous studies on possession and abduction by applying an interdisciplinary approach drawing on insights from psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists, and scholars of religion and culture. This thesis is unique in that it places jinn possession in conversation with alien abduction, comparing how modern psychiatry and psychology understand and treat these phenomena. Overall, this thesis seeks to challenge the binary of science and religion by demonstrating the ways in which psychology and psychiatry can and do incorporate spiritual ideas and practices in their treatment modalities. It contributes to research exploring the intersections of culture, mental health, and spirituality.

### *Studies on jinn and possession*

Much psychiatric literature on jinn possession is written by and for practitioners of non-Muslim backgrounds working with immigrant Muslim populations, for example in the Netherlands or the US.<sup>6</sup> There are also studies on jinn possession and psychiatric care in

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<sup>6</sup> For an analysis of Muslim immigrants and jinn possession in the UK, see Elspeth Guthrie, Seri Abraham, and Shahzada Nawaz, “Process of Determining the Value of Belief about Jinn Possession and Whether or Not They Are a Result of Mental Illness.” *BMJ Case Rep.* published online Jan 17 2016, <https://casereports.bmj.com/content/2016/bcr-2015-214005>; see also Najat Khalifa and Tim Hardie, “Possession



Muslim-majority countries.<sup>7</sup> These studies explain how Muslims understand jinn to cause mental illness and offer suggestions for psychiatrists who treat these populations. Some present case studies of jinn possession, outlining the symptoms, diagnosis, treatment, and outcomes through a psychiatric lens. This medical literature takes for granted that jinn cannot be the instigator of any patient's symptoms and thus looks for the true cause of pathology elsewhere.

A foundational source of information about jinn is the Qur'an. For centuries, the descriptions found in the holy text of Islam have informed people's understandings about these beings and their natures. Jinn are mentioned several times throughout the text and there is a *sūra*, or chapter, titled "Sūra of the Jinn."<sup>8</sup> In addition, there are many mentions of jinn in the *hadith*, the collection of the Prophet's sayings. Mentions of jinn in these Islamic

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and Jinn," *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 98 (2005), 351-353. For a case study of a young Sudanese immigrant in the US, see Lewis et al., "Jinn and Psychosis: Providing Culturally Informed Care to Muslim Adolescents and Families," *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 56, no. 6, (2017): 455-457. For an overview of psychiatric literature on jinn possession, see Anastasia Lim, Hans W. Hoek, and Jan Dirk Blom, "The Attribution of Psychotic Symptoms to Jinn in Islamic Patients," *Transcultural Psychiatry* 52, no. 1 (2015), 18-32.

<sup>7</sup> For a case study of a Pakistani women experiencing jinn possession, see Qurat ul ain Khan and Aisha Sanober, "'Jinn Possession' and Delirious Mania in a Pakistani Woman," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 173, no. 3 (2016), 219-200. For an analysis of an Omani man and spirit possession, see Guenedi et al., "Investigation of the Cerebral Blood Flow of an Omani Man with Supposed 'Spirit Possession' Associated with an Altered Mental State," *Journal of Medical Case Reports* 3, no. 1 (2009).

<sup>8</sup> Qur'an 72:1-28 (Sahih International).

scriptures form a major part of Muslim conceptualizations of these beings, which the Qur'an states were created out of "smokeless fire."<sup>9</sup>

Much of the modern English literature about jinn comes from Islamic publishing centers and presents a mainline, orthodox Sunni explanation of jinn drawn from the Qur'an and the *hadith*. These texts often focus on three elements of jinn: what they are, what they are capable of doing to humans, and how humans can protect themselves from jinn. *The Jinn and Human Sickness: Remedies in the Light of the Qur'aan and Sunnah* by Abu'l-Mundhir Khaleel ibn Ibraaheem Ameen focuses specifically on the afflictions that jinn can cause to humans, how to treat such afflictions, and general protection from jinn and other sources of evil magic. In terms of orthodox Sunni expoundings on jinn, it exemplifies modern Sunni scholars' didactic focus regarding these entities and defends the ontological reality (and dangers) of jinn.

In terms of academic literature published by non-Islamic sources, journalist Robert Lebling's *Legends of the Fire Spirits* provides an overview of jinn drawn from folklore and local traditions across the Islamic world, from the *jahiliyya* to the present. He surveys different geographical regions and different types of jinn, resulting in a kind of jinncyclopedia, and presents various ethnographical accounts of jinn as told by locals of the various regions discussed. Jinn possession is not the main focus of the book, yet many stories about possession are collected, highlighting commonalities across the Islamic world. Lebling sees jinn as a means by which people cope with the unknown. He does not take a stance about their ontological reality; rather than being a clearly delineated entity which may or may not really exist, jinn are "a very reasonable—and in a sense reassuring—solution to the

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<sup>9</sup> Qur'an 55:15 (Sahih International).

mysteries that surround us,” in the sense that they provide an explanatory framework for confusing, sudden, and distressing events.<sup>10</sup> He posits a parallel between jinn, aliens, elves, fairies, Japanese *kami*, and other shapeshifting, mysterious, spiritual entities, asserting that “the existence of strikingly similar traditions across the planet shows us that we are dealing with something truly fundamental to and a significant part of what it means to be human.”<sup>11</sup>

Amira El-Zein, professor of Arabic language and literature, also offers an expansive array of jinn narratives taken from classical Islam along with an overview of jinn characteristics. She, too, draws a parallel between jinn and spiritual entities from other traditions, like *kami*, Indian *Yaksas*, and the *daemons* of ancient Greece. In *Islam, Arabs and the Intelligent World of the Jinn*, El-Zein argues that understanding jinn is crucial for grasping Islamic cosmology, because jinn, as “imaginal” beings, embody a liminality between the terrestrial and celestial realms and thus help to define both.<sup>12</sup> She analyzes classical stories on jinn and presents them as entities who are spiritual but not relegated to one sphere of morality (unlike angels and demons in the Christian tradition). They can interact with humans on our terrestrial, physical plane but also operate as non-material beings within the celestial realm. To El-Zein, jinn are beings whose existence not only challenges the Western secular conceptualization of reality as purely material, but builds upon millenia

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Lebling, *Legends of the Fire Spirits: Jinn and Genies from Arabia to Zanzibar* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 243.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Amira El-Zein, *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009), x-xi.

of trans-cultural belief in the spiritual world.<sup>13</sup> She concludes that jinn reflect the unity of creation, of cosmic consciousness, and the liminal space of the “imaginal.” “They enlighten us that physical reality is not the only reality. It is impossible to locate them on our physical map. We have to seek them out on the atlas of the imaginal where they invent their transformations before emerging onto the material plane, dressed in their impermanent bodies to ensnare us.”<sup>14</sup> She notes that the connection between madness and jinn possession stretches back to pre-Islamic Arabic.<sup>15</sup> In addition to focusing on jinn as liminal entities mediating between the spiritual and material worlds, El-Zein also explores stories of jinn possession and methods for its prevention and treatment in classical Islamic literature and what she calls “folk Islam:” legends, popular stories, and folktales.

Anthropologist Barbara Drieskens studies how people in modern Cairo interact with jinn in their everyday lives.<sup>16</sup> She examines how jinn are conceptualized, communicated with, and protected against, and how lower-middle-class Cairo families understand jinn as a facet of both their faith and culture in *Living with Djinn*. Drieskens shows how jinn possession is understood to be a typical part of jinn behavior, and describes the elaborate rituals evolved to support the treatment of those possessed by jinn. Her study depicts the cultural stigmas and tensions that exist between those who interact with those possessed by jinn (who are often considered backwards, especially if they hail from rural areas) and the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, xi-xvii.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 134-135.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 74.

<sup>16</sup>Barbara Drieskens, *Living with Djinn: Understanding and Dealing with the Invisible in Cairo* (San Francisco: Saqi, 2008): 163-199

Cairenes who refuse to speak about it (with non-Egyptian researchers, in any case).

Drieskens' work is a compelling picture of the tangled web of cultural, social, and religious factors which imbricate in Cairenes' speech and storytelling about jinn—stories which are often carefully delivered, sometimes shifting from one telling to the next in order to convey deliberately crafted moral overtones.

### *Studies on abduction*

The existing literature on abductions can be roughly classified into three categories: authors who argue that the beings experienced by abductees are extraterrestrial aliens existing in physical reality (the “believers”); authors who argue that such beings are the result of quasi-pathological states like sleep paralysis and have no basis in physical reality (the “skeptics”); and authors who take a more nuanced approach, arguing that physical stimuli and cultural conditioning together create the conditions for an abduction experience.

#### *a. The believers*

The three most influential abduction researchers are Budd Hopkins, David Jacobs, and John Mack. Hopkins was an artist who became interested in abductions and learned how to perform hypnosis to support his abduction research. Although not the first to use hypnosis to uncover memories of abduction, Hopkins honed and popularized the method. His book *Missing Time* was the first published collection of abduction narratives. Through hypnosis of abductees, he garnered accounts of brutal experiments that aliens<sup>17</sup> performed on their

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<sup>17</sup> Although popular culture has inextricably linked abductions to the aliens who supposedly carry it out, some scholars of abduction opt for language which does not assume that all abductees understand their kidnapers to

victims, which often carried explicit reproductive elements like harvesting eggs or semen and implanting fetuses into female abductees. Hopkins argues that such experiments prove that aliens are real, dangerous, and conducting a massive scheme of human-alien hybridization.<sup>18</sup>

David Jacobs strikes a similar tone in his book *Secret Life*. Jacobs, now retired from his post as a professor of American history at Temple University, became an abduction researcher and, like Hopkins, conducted hypnotic regression therapy on people who believed that they may have been abducted in order to collect and analyze their stories. They contain many of the same themes as Hopkins' accounts: sightings of strange lights or figures, being taken onto a strange ship, and undergoing painful quasi-medical experiments or procedures, often with an emphasis on harvesting or implanting genetic material. Jacobs, like Hopkins, concludes that aliens are not only real, but actively pose a threat to human society due to their attempts at breeding human-alien hybrids that can infiltrate our societies.<sup>19</sup>

John Mack, a psychiatrist and researcher at Harvard, used his credentials to push the issue of abduction into the realms of academic and medical research, even co-organizing a scientific conference on alien abduction at M.I.T. in 1992. Mack's book *Abducted* presents the stories of thirteen abductees who underwent hypnotic therapy with him. Despite their parallel tales of capture, painful and unwilling manipulation, and release, his patients

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be aliens. Instead, they use the more neutral term "being" or "entity." I do the same throughout this thesis in order to respect divergent interpretations of the abduction phenomenon, except when presenting the ideas of a researcher who himself uses the term "alien" to describe his findings.

<sup>18</sup> Budd Hopkins, *Missing Time: A Documented Study of UFO Abductions* (New York: Richard Marek Publishers, 1981): 220-222.

<sup>19</sup> David Jacobs, *Secret Life: Firsthand Accounts of UFO Abductions* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992): 154-157.

reported positive aspects to their experiences. One called it “an evolution of consciousness;” another recounted that the beings she interacted with were trying to encourage her “personal evolution” in order to achieve ‘universal understanding.’”<sup>20</sup> Because of this, Mack concludes that alien beings are not only real but also benevolent; they seek to save us by raising our global consciousness and eradicating the selfish, capitalist mindsets that are causing environmental catastrophe to our world.<sup>21</sup> Hopkins, Jacobs, and Mack were massively influential in fostering an outpouring of abduction narratives in the 1980s-1990s and validating the experiences of abductees as real phenomena that modern Americans should be taking seriously.

One of the best-known UFO researchers, or ufologist, astronomer and computer scientist Jacques Vallee is another giant in the field of the believers, although he does not perform hypnosis and takes a very different stance from abduction researchers. *Passport to Magonia* explores the parallels between alien contact stories and folkloric tales of human interaction with fairies, gnomes, dwarves, and other non-human beings. Published before the popularization of abduction narratives, the book addresses them in a general sense as one way among many that humans weave tales about non-human entities, drawing connections between abduction by aliens and kidnapping by fairies—a staple of European folklore.<sup>22</sup> In *Messengers of Deception*, Vallee puts forth a theory of “the phenomenon” (a catchall term

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<sup>20</sup> John Mack, *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens* (New York: Macmillan, 1994), 308, 380.

<sup>21</sup> Mack, *Abduction*, 408.

<sup>22</sup> Jacques Vallee, *Passport to Magonia: From Folklore to Flying Saucers* (Brisbane: Daily Grail, 2014).

for both UFOs and alien contact experiences) as inherently deceptive, likely malicious, and ultimately unfathomable because of our present scientific limitations.<sup>23</sup>

Whitley Strieber helped put the phenomenon of alien abduction on the American cultural landscape with his bestselling book *Communion*, in which he documents his own abduction experience.<sup>24</sup> Previously a bestselling author of horror and science fiction novels, Strieber has come under fire from critics who question the authenticity of his account, point out parallels between *Communion* and his previous works, and decry the million-dollar advance he received from its publisher.<sup>25</sup> Whether dramatized falsehood or piercingly personal trauma, the events of *Communion* widely popularized the alien abduction story in the US and struck a chord with its readers. Ten years after the book had come out, Strieber had received almost two hundred thousand letters from people sharing similar stories.<sup>26</sup> Some abductees reported that reading the book or even simply seeing its cover (which features the now-classic image of an alien visage) triggered strange feelings or dreams which led them to discover accounts of their own abductions.<sup>27</sup> Beyond serving as a template for abduction narratives in the future, the story of *Communion* solidified Strieber's position as a valued resource within the field of abduction research. He has co-authored a book with Jeffrey

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<sup>23</sup> Jacques Vallee, *Messengers of Deception: UFO Contacts and Cults*, Daily Grail Publishing (2008), vi, 249-251.

<sup>24</sup> Whitley Strieber, *Communion: A True Story* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1987).

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Disch, *The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of: How Science Fiction Conquered the World* (New York: Free Press, 2007): 6.

<sup>26</sup> Denzler, *Lure of the Edge*, 56; Halperin, *Intimate Alien*, 88.

<sup>27</sup> For example, two of John Mack's patients, Eva and Dave, report that they had strange dreams after reading the book which they then connected to abduction experiences. Mack, *Abduction*, 242, 271.



Kripal and spoke at the first Archives of the Impossible conference hosted by Rice University in April 2022.

Jeffrey Kripal, a professor of religious studies at Rice University, represents the “believers” within the realms of humanistic academia. In collaboration with Strieber, he argues that contact with aliens—or really, any kind of supernatural or paranormal experience—could exist in an “imaginal” realm, a kind of crossover between the mundane world and possible other dimensions. By using the framework of the imaginal, he opens up a space for real supernaturality or paranormality—a space for nonhuman entities to truly exist in a liminal medium facilitated by our own consciousnesses.<sup>28</sup>

*b. The skeptics*

Susan Clancy, a psychiatric researcher at Harvard, attempts to find psychological explanations for abductions in her book *Abducted: How People Come to Believe They Were Kidnapped by Aliens*. Her general conclusion is that sleep paralysis is the main cause of the initial symptoms of abduction—feelings of fear, seeing strange figures, inability to move—and a small minority of sleep paralysis victims then flesh out accompanying narratives through imagination and hypnosis, fed by media portrayals of abductions.

Psychological and psychiatric literature on alien abductions usually takes the skeptical approach, assuming that such experiences are the result of pathological or otherwise non-ordinary mental functioning (such as sleep paralysis). Psychiatric journals and other medical literature seek to understand abduction experiences through the lens of medical

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<sup>28</sup> Whitley Strieber and Jeffrey Kripal, *The Supernatural: Why the Unexplained is Real* (New York: TarcherPerigree, 2017), 120-129.

explanation and thus inherently negate their potential ontological reality. There is also no shortage of criticism of the techniques that Hopkins, Jacobs, and Mack used in their collection of abduction narratives, with many studies pointing out the connection between hypnosis and false memories.<sup>29</sup> An important exception to the typically skeptical position of psychiatric literature are the contributions of John Mack, detailed above.

The skeptical position is characterized by an immediate and unquestioned dismissal of abductions as representing anything other than abnormal mental functioning. Those straddling the line between skeptics and believers, however, posit that abduction stories perform some kind of role in the lives of abductees and those who believe in the abduction phenomenon.

*c. The in-betweeners*

The researchers who dance between outright advocacy for and dismissal of the reality of abduction claim typically hail from the social and religious studies fields. For example, Benson Saler and Scott Scribner, both anthropologists, see abduction narratives as explanatory frameworks mapped onto experiences like sleep paralysis and intense dreams,

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<sup>29</sup> Susan Clancy, *Abducted: How People Come to Believe They Were Kidnapped by Aliens*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 36, 48-48; Georg M. Ronnevig, "Toward an Explanation of the 'Abduction Epidemic,'" in *Alien Worlds: Social and Religious Dimensions of Extraterrestrial Contact*, ed. Diana G. Tumminia (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 117.

while sociologist Christopher Bader studies the role of abduction support groups in validating and even constructing the beliefs of the abductees who attend them.<sup>30</sup>

Brenda Denzler, one of the longest-running observers of alien abductee communities, also takes a sociological approach, surveying the demographics of abductees and observing the communities in which they embed themselves. Her research argues that abduction experiences constitute part of a new religious type in the US which connects spiritual and scientific themes. She asserts that the UFO myth as a whole “has crystallized within itself the language and praxis of a scientific modernity along with the myths and symbols of an ancient and venerable human quest that first found a home in religion.”<sup>31</sup>

Bridget Brown, a researcher in cultural studies, uses a culture-wide level of analysis in her work. She criticizes Hopkins, Jacobs, and Mack for failing to understand their patients’ backgrounds as a whole and instead focusing on their supposed abductions as the cause of any and all mental and personal issues. She argues the opposite: that people who experience psychological problems, personal trauma, or general ennui may formulate abductions, with

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<sup>30</sup> Benson Saler, “Secondary Beliefs and the Alien Abduction Phenomenon,” *Alien Worlds: Social and Religious Dimensions of Extraterrestrial Contact*, ed. Diana G. Tumminia (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 128-137. Scott R. Scribner, “Alien Abduction Narratives and Religious Contexts”, *Alien Worlds: Social and Religious Dimensions of Extraterrestrial Contact*, ed. Diana G. Tumminia (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 138-152. Christopher D. Bader, “UFO Abduction Support Groups: *Who Are the Members?* *Alien Worlds: Social and Religious Dimensions of Extraterrestrial Contact*, ed. Diana G. Tumminia (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 291-308.

<sup>31</sup> Brenda Denzler, *The Lure of the Edge: Scientific Passions, Religious Beliefs, and the Pursuit of UFOs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 159.

the help of hypnosis, which then serves as a scapegoat for all of their problems. She takes this argument further by positing that abduction stories as a genre express the deep dissatisfaction and concern that many Americans feel about their lives within a globalist capitalist system paired with an increasingly secretive government. The fact that abduction narratives are fundamentally accounts of victimization by powerful entities, to Brown, indicates that abductees externalize their feelings of victimization by society into empowerment through the positive attention and mutual support that such accounts can garner in the ufology community.<sup>32</sup>

Religious studies professor Diane Pasulka researches UFO and alien belief, although without a focus on abductions. Her conclusions also posit that belief in aliens and/or UFOs is a new form of religion. Pasulka states that the American cultural and media interest in UFOs and aliens constitutes a nascent religion primed for the modern, technologically-driven era.<sup>33</sup>

Classicist and cultural theorist David Halperin employs depth psychology in his approach to abduction in *Intimate Alien*. Drawing on Carl Jung's theory that UFOs are a myth made visible, he holds that abductions are a psychological projection of trauma onto an external stimulus.<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, he argues, the human-yet-nonhuman entities within the kidnapping crafts are symbols of humanity's greatest fear—death—embodied in a modern

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<sup>32</sup> Bridget Brown, *They Know Us Better Than We Know Ourselves: The History and Politics of Alien Abduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 13-20.

<sup>34</sup> David Halperin, *Intimate Alien: The Hidden Story of the UFO* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020): 61-86.

myth that seems to “mirror and to be rooted in the human condition of their times.”<sup>35</sup> For Halperin, understanding the phenomenon of abduction is one and the same with understanding the psychological milieu of those who experience abduction, for it is they who impart meaning to the experience through their own psychological projection.

## **Part I: Jinn**

### *Ancient spirits of legend*

Jinn<sup>36</sup> are a foundational part of Islamic folklore. They are typically found in wild places, but also in homes, trees, bushes, the bottom of wells, and even bathrooms. Jinn are so common in the world described by folktales that an encounter with an out-of-place person is often met with the question, “Are you human or are you jinn?”<sup>37</sup> People from the pre-Islamic era to the current day attribute a variety of misfortune and ills to the presence of jinn, who generally remain invisible to human eyes.

Jinn are included in both the Qur’an and the *hadith* and expanded upon greatly in the folklore of popular Islam. Because of their presence in the holy text of Islam, a believing Muslim is expected to accept the reality of jinn. To what extent is, of course, another matter. Some Muslims accept that jinn are real but do not delve further into what that entails for everyday life. Other Muslims have thought deeply about the existence of jinn, expounding

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>36</sup> A note on terminology; following Arabic conventions, I refer to these beings as “jinn” in the plural, while a single male is “jinni” and a single female is “jinniya.”

<sup>37</sup> Lebling, *Legends of the Fire Spirits*, 240.

upon their nature, behavior, and the effects they can bring to bear upon humans in their vicinity. Some Muslims have encountered jinn personally and attest to the lasting effects they can inflict on humans.

Jinn are not human, but they are not angels or demons, either; according to the Qur'an, they belong to a third category of spiritual being intermediate between humans and the heavenly realm. Nevertheless, they are parallel to humans in many ways. According to the Qur'an, humans and jinn are the only two groups to whom God has sent his messengers and holy texts. Like humans, jinn have rational faculties that allow them to reason, discern, and interrogate their position in the world; like humans, they have free will; and like humans, they bear responsibility for their actions and will be held accountable on the Day of Judgement for their comportment.

There is also a parallel between the kinds of activities that humans and jinn carry out. Jinn are male and female; they have children, eat, drink, and eventually die. They form communities which the Qur'an refers to as *umam*, nations—the same word that the Qur'an uses to refer to human communities. Jinn adhere to various belief traditions, be they Muslim, Christian, Jewish, or even Hindu or Buddhist, depending on the region.<sup>38</sup> Like humans, they thirst for spiritual truth, and countless hadith tell of their tenacity in seeking out Muslim scholars to teach them the finer points of Islamic theology and practice.

Unlike humans, jinn come in a mind-bending variety of shapes both beautiful and fearsome. The range is vast, from the Iraqi *s'iluwa*, a water-spirit who eats human flesh and is shaped like a woman with a fish tail instead of legs, to the more amiable jinn of Yemen, who can take the form of a Yemeni man and sit in the house making conversation like any

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<sup>38</sup> El-Zein, *World of the Jinn*, 17.

guest.<sup>39</sup> Although they often appear in humanoid form, they can shape-shift and take the form of an animal, usually a snake or a dog. Some can fly, and all can make themselves invisible to the human eye. If provoked, they can terrorize or kill a human with seemingly little effort. Wild or desolate places like ruins, abandoned villages, treasure troves, and graveyards are associated with jinn. Thresholds, representing the boundary of the natural and the supernatural, are linked to jinn and folk tradition warns people from lingering in thresholds or pouring water over them.<sup>40</sup> Bathrooms are known to be favored locations for jinn, prompting many faithful Muslims to recite *bismillah* (the name of God) before entering a bathroom to protect themselves.<sup>41</sup>

#### *A short history of jinn*

The origin of jinn is uncertain, but scholars generally agree that they arose in the ancient Middle East. In their earliest era, they may have been demons or nature deities. Although most jinn were tied to the desert—like Pazuzu, the infamous Mesopotamian wind demon that Lebling calls “a primordial jinn”—it was not the desert nomads but the settled city-dwellers who viewed such creatures with respect and fear. Assyrian and Babylonian societies left behind stories and images of spirits with jinn-like characteristics who lurked in desolate places, waiting for human victims.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Lebling, *Fire Spirits*, 128, 173.

<sup>40</sup> El-Zein, *World of the Jinn*, 85-86.

<sup>41</sup> Jami' at-Tirmidhi, 606.

<sup>42</sup> Lebling, *Fire Spirits*, 11.

In the *jahiliyya* period prior to the advent of Islam, the term “jinn” referred to all beings who are both spiritual and invisible, including demons and angels. The Arabic root *jnn* جَنَّ means hidden or invisible. Some pre-Islamic Arabs venerated jinn because they were traditionally linked to angels and local deities. One finds evidence of the name Abdu-jinn (servant of jinn) in usage during the pre-Islamic period. In the city of Palmyra in ancient Syria, *ginaya* were tutelary deities for certain places, similar to Roman *genii* which watched over homes and villages. Some archaeologists and historians draw an etymological connection between the Aramaic word *gene*, the Latin *genii*, and the terms “genie” and even “genius.” These scholars argue that protective local deities like the *ginaya* and *genii* share a common source with Arabic jinn, who may have served a similar role in the Arabian Peninsula by watching over designated areas.<sup>43</sup>

In pre-Islamic Arabia, seers were thought to commune with jinn, who ascended to heaven to hear the secrets of the angels which they would then bring back down to earth to share with their human companion. A female seer in particular is able to transmit this information, as a jinni could enter her body and speak through her mouth more readily than with a male host. In return, the jinni requested a reward—a *hulwan*, or something sweet—which the seer was obligated to give.<sup>44</sup> In the post-Islamic period, the position of seers gradually faded away. Muslim scholars cast doubt on the seers’ capabilities and decreed revelation such as the Qur’an as superior to divination. Seership, it would seem, fell out of practice in the Islamic world, but the jinn remained.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 11-16.

<sup>44</sup> El-Zein, *World of the Jinn*, 57.



The primordial legends of jinn and jinn-like spirits evolved into a complex set of beliefs and stories after the advent of Islam. Folk Islam abounded with colorful tales of their nefarious exploits, while early and medieval Muslim scholars sought to explain the origins, capabilities and limitations of jinn.

The Islamic origin story of jinn has many iterations. According to the *hadith*, the Prophet's son-in-law 'Ali ibn abi Taleb (d. 661 CE) reported that jinn originally lived on earth, praising God and often ascending to the heavens to confer with the angels, but ultimately "they rebelled and shed blood and ignored God."<sup>45</sup> God sent angels to expel jinn from earth, banishing them to the oceans. Another version of the creation story casts jinn as an invading army that drove evil angels off of the earth and then occupied it themselves. This account matches up with the belief that jinn remain on earth and dwell in desolate places, a notion supported by Islamic scholars such as Ibn Kathir and folk Islam in general. Other scholars agree that Iblis, or Satan, is the leader of evil jinn and originally lived on earth in the company of angels.<sup>46</sup>

After the emergence of Islam, stories focused less on jinn's potential to glean secrets from the heavens and more on their status as potential co-religionists with humans. The Qur'an speaks about the nature of jinn and their place in the hierarchy of Islamic cosmology, as well as narrative encounters between the Prophet Muhammad and jinn. In these encounters, non-Muslim jinn come to accept the Prophet's revelations and become Muslim

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<sup>45</sup> El-Zein, *World of the Jinn*, 39.

<sup>46</sup> The Ikhwan al-Safa', the 10<sup>th</sup>-century Brotherhood of Purity in Basra, relate the origin story of Iblis in one of their epistles. Ibn 'Arabi, Al-Ibshihi, and Humammad ibn 'Abd Allah al-Azraqi give similar accounts but the details of Iblis' departure from earth differ.

after listening to his explanations of the faith. Biographies of the Prophet and stories told by his companions recount additional meetings between the Prophet and jinn, most of which feature jinn seeking wisdom and guidance from him. Depictions of jinn in Islamic folklore often present a jinni's religion as a litmus test for his character.<sup>47</sup> Muslim jinn are helpful to the Muslim humans that they encounter, pagan jinn are evil and dangerous, and Christian or Jewish jinn fall somewhere in between.

Islamic scholars of all backgrounds, from the 7<sup>th</sup> century to the present day, tell countless stories about jinn who were companions to humans. Ibn al-Nadim in the 10<sup>th</sup> century recounted that God gave King Solomon, the famed Israelite ruler, command over both good and evil jinn, who helped construct the Temple of Jerusalem and other municipal infrastructure. The Sufi master Ibn 'Arabi wrote biographies of other Sufi masters who conferred regularly with jinn. When Abu Ja'far ul-'Uryani was exiled from his hometown, his companion jinni, Khalaf, tormented the townspeople by publicly declaring all of their secrets until they repented and begged the master to return home.<sup>48</sup> Abu al-Hajjaj Yusuf al-Shubarbuli's jinni protected him from being robbed while deep in prayer. In this way, as Lebling notes, "jinn characters become part of a morality tale or fable designed to teach a lesson about right and wrong."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> For example, a companion of the Prophet was kidnapped by pagan jinn, then later rescued and returned home by a band of Muslim jinn. The 18<sup>th</sup>-century scholar Shah Waliullah Dehlavi killed a snake, not realizing it was a jinni in animal form; he was kidnapped by jinn to stand trial in a jinn court and was sentenced to death, but a Muslim jinn intervened in his defense and his accusers spared his life. See Lebling, *Fire Spirits*, 88-92.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 52.

After the Middle Ages, commentaries on jinn have become less frequent. Historians, folklorists, and scholars of the modern era collect and expound on stories of jinn, but such tales are usually taken to be fascinating cultural nuggets rather than accounts of actual encounters. Edward Lane, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Orientalist scholar of Egyptian society, compiled a short explanation of jinn in his notes on Arab and Muslim culture.<sup>50</sup> Muhammad Asad, a Pakistani diplomat and author of one of the most well-read English interpretations of the Qur'an, includes in that translation an appendix on jinn which views them more as metaphors than actual entities.<sup>51</sup>

Speculation on the nature of jinn continues into the present day with theories that incorporate modern science. Jinn might be made of electromagnetic energy vibrating at a higher frequency than humans, or made of plasma: or they have some connection to the barely-plumbed depths of quantum physics.<sup>52</sup> Internet sites and forums host countless conversations between Muslims who share advice for protection against jinn and swap stories of their own (or their mother's, or their friend's friend's) encounters with these beings.<sup>53</sup>

The history of jinn stems from ancient times and stretches to the modern. It is the site of lively debate about who and what these beings are, and what they are capable of with respect to the humans that they encounter. From primordial jinn-as-deity to modern jinn as theoretical-science-based mystery/urban legend, their central characteristics have

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<sup>50</sup> Edward Lane, trans., *The Thousand and One Nights* (New York: Pickwick Publishers, 1927).

<sup>51</sup> Muhammad Asad, trans. and ed, *The Message of the Qur'an* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1984).

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 259-264.

<sup>53</sup> For example, see "R/Askreddit - Muslims of Reddit, What Are Some Jinn Stories You've Heard?," reddit, 2019, [https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/cee7it/muslims\\_of\\_reddit\\_what\\_are\\_some\\_jinn\\_stories/](https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/cee7it/muslims_of_reddit_what_are_some_jinn_stories/).

nevertheless remained fairly constant. They are sometimes helpful, often invisible, and always something to be wary of.

### *Possession by jinn*

Since antiquity, Arabs have attested to the ability of jinn to inflict sickness, and mental illness in particular. In Arabic, jinn shares a root with the word *majnun* مجنون , meaning “insane.” Insanity, epilepsy, and other forms of neurological and mental illness have been attributed to the poisoning influence of evil jinn. This attribution is also present in the language used to describe both possession and epileptic fits: Arabic employs the same word (*sara* ‘) for each.

The writings of prominent Islamic scholars attest to the reality and dangers of jinn possession. Ibn Taymiyyah, a renowned medieval theologian, wrote, “The penetration of the jinnee into the human body is also an established fact, according to the consensus of leading Sunni scholars...the jinnee enters one seized by fits and causes him to speak incomprehensible words, unknown to himself, if one seized by fits is struck with a blow enough to kill a camel, he does not feel it.”<sup>54</sup> He states that the most common motive for possession is when a jinni is wronged by a human and desires revenge. This can happen in seemingly minor ways, such as accidentally urinating on an invisible jinni (hence the caution around bathrooms).

The prophetic tradition supports the notion of jinn possession. One *hadith* recounts the Prophet blowing three times into the mouth of a boy afflicted by seizures and telling the

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<sup>54</sup> Lebling, *Fire Spirits*, 73.

jinni who possesses him to leave in the name of God, which heals the boy.<sup>55</sup> Other accounts have a back-and-forth between a healer (often a *sheikh*, a tribal leader) and the jinni who uses the body of the possessed as a mouthpiece. The medieval theologian and jurist Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah tells the story of a *sheikh* who beat the patient with a stick, all the while conversing with the jinni possessing him: “During this beating the spirit said: ‘I love him.’ So I said to it: ‘He does not love you.’ Then it said: ‘I wish to accompany him.’ I replied: ‘He does not want your company.’” After this beating, along with an admonition from the *sheikh* to leave in the name of God and his Messenger, the jinni departs, leaving the patient bewildered as to where he was and why he was there.<sup>56</sup>

Belief in jinn’s ability to cause various forms of mental and neurological illness remains widespread in many parts of the Islamic world today. In Saudi Arabia, over 50% of university students in one survey believed that jinn possession is the cause of epilepsy.<sup>57</sup> A study of Muslims at an outpatient psychiatric clinic in the Netherlands found that 43% of the respondents were positive that their symptoms (which were predominantly aggression attacks, depression, and hallucinations) were caused by jinn. Most of the patients who were eligible to participate in the study declined because they were reluctant to talk about jinn with Western medical professionals or afraid of repercussions from jinn if they did so.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 73-74.

<sup>56</sup> El-Zein, *World of the Jinn*, 84.

<sup>57</sup> Tahir Obeid et al., “Possession by ‘Jinn’ as a cause of epilepsy (Saraa): A Study from Saudi Arabia,” *Seizure* 21, no.4 (2012): 246.

<sup>58</sup> Anastasia Lim et al., “The Attribution of Mental Health Problems to Jinn: An Explorative Study in a Transcultural Psychiatric Outpatient Clinic,” *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 9, no. 89 (2018): 1.

### *Traditional treatments for jinn possession*

Symptoms attributed to jinn possession include hallucinations, delusions, anxiety, aggression, depression, mutism, and self-mutilation, as well as somatic symptoms like headaches, fatigue, and seizures. People convinced that they are possessed by jinn may seek treatment at a psychiatric facility. They may also seek out traditional therapies, namely *zar* rituals or the administrations of *rāqin*.

*Zar* ceremonies are present in North Africa, the Middle East, and parts of South Asia. They are generally not regarded as proper Islamic activity and most Muslims do not participate in them. They are also primarily for women. An elaborate and intense ceremony, *zar* ceremonies in Egypt and Oman can last for up to seven days depending on the severity of the possession.<sup>59</sup> The possessed person, who is usually a woman or girl, sits in the center of the room, surrounded by other women who have also been possessed but have had their jinn placated through previous *zar* ceremonies of their own. Musicians play various kinds of music and rhythms until she reacts and starts to dance—this is the sign that the jinni has revealed itself and is responding to the music. The ritual leader, or *sheikha*, then speaks to the jinni and asks it what it wants. The jinni will tell her, and attendees will attempt to fulfill its wishes. It might ask for material goods, like jewelry: culturally stigmatized goods, like tobacco or alcohol: or emotional goods, like better treatment from a family member or husband. Mollified, the jinni will allow the possessed woman to regain control of her body and reintegrate into her normal life. However, the jinni is not exorcised, but remains with her

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<sup>59</sup> Kennedy, “Nubian Zar Ceremonies as Psychotherapy,” 194. Samir Al-Adawi et al., “Zar: group distress and healing,” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 4, no. 1 (2001): 51.

for the rest of her life.<sup>60</sup> Regular *zar* are required for her to maintain normalcy lest the jinni feel scorned and exert its dire influence once again.

The predominance of women in *zar* rituals is well-documented.<sup>61</sup> Al-Shahi states that *zar* ceremonies provide a space free of cultural taboos and patriarchal regulations. Most *zar* patients are women possessed by male jinn: in the context of *zar* rituals, women are permitted to engage in activities allowed only to men, including donning men's attire, imbibing alcohol, and smoking cigarettes, if the possessing jinni demands such activities.<sup>62</sup> "During the period of *zar* possession a woman steps outside the conventional social patterns of behavior and is free to express her individuality, which, in normal circumstances, is neither tolerated nor respected".<sup>63</sup> Possession by jinn within the context of *zar* rituals thus serves as an "emotional and social outlet for women in patriarchal societies."<sup>64</sup>

However, a much more common form of traditional treatment for jinn possession is going to a *raqi*, or one who performs *ruqya*. *Ruqya* is the recitation of certain Qur'an verses as a remedy for illness caused by jinn, magic, or the evil eye. Qur'an 2:255, known as the Throne Verse, is believed to expel evil jinn, and the opening chapter of the Qur'an is believed to hold protective value from all kinds of illness, including those caused by jinn. In

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<sup>60</sup> Kennedy, "Nubian Zar Ceremonies as Psychotherapy," 186.

<sup>61</sup> Lebling, *Fire Spirits*, 76. See also Ahmed al-Shahi, "Spirit Possession and Healing: the ZAR among the Shaygiyya of Northern Sudan," *Bulletin (British Society for Middle East Studies)* 11, no. 1 (1984): 28 and Fahimeh Mianji and Yousef Semnani, "Zar Spirit Possession in Iran and African Countries," *Iranian Journal of Psychiatry* 10, no. 4, (2015): 225.

<sup>62</sup> Lebling, *Fire Spirits*, 77.

<sup>63</sup> Al-Shahi, "Spirit Possession and Healing," 39.

<sup>64</sup> Lebling, *Fire Spirits*, 77.

the medieval era, words from these passages were written on amulets that were worn on the body or written directly on the skin; they were even written on paper that was dissolved in water, which the patient then drank.<sup>65</sup> El-Zein asserts that the power of these words and letters come from their connection to the divine realm through the medium of the Qur'an, the revelation of God.<sup>66</sup> Connection to the divine embodied in Arabic language is seen as a protective shield and healing salve for believers, defending them from evil jinn and treating the mental wounds sustained from their assaults.

A *raqi* typically interviews the patient about their problem, recites Qur'anic verses, and analyzes how the patient reacts to the words. Jinn are believed to be agitated by *ruqya* and will elicit a physical response from the person they are possessing. If the *raqi* determines that a jinni is possessing the victim, he may converse with it and order it to leave, sometimes by causing physical pain.<sup>67</sup> She or he might prescribe remedies of herbs or olive oil for the patient to ingest, or give instructions for Qur'an recitation that the patient can perform at home. The patient then returns after a length of time to ensure their illness has disappeared.

The effectiveness of these traditional treatments can defy the expectations of modern medicine. An Iraqi immigrant in the UK became withdrawn and stopped eating or drinking. She did not respond to electroconvulsive therapy; her family, convinced that jinn possession

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<sup>65</sup> El-Zein, *World of the Jinn*, 78.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 80.

<sup>67</sup> Yusuf Muslim Eneborg, "Ruqya Shariya: Observing the rise of a new faith healing tradition amongst Muslims in East London," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 16, no. 10 (2013): 1091.



was to blame, took her to a *raqi* and her condition improved.<sup>68</sup> One Moroccan woman living in Israel demonstrated several symptoms of PTSD after witnessing an artillery explosion in her village that resulted in the injury and death of several children. A local faith healer poured a mixture of egg and olive oil onto her head (both of which are foods that jinn love), and this cured her symptoms entirely.<sup>69</sup> Kennedy, who analyzed *zar* ceremonies in Egypt, recounted a story of a woman with apparent schizophrenia who recovered fully after a seven-day *zar* and had been in remission for eight years.<sup>70</sup> Stories of effective faith healings via *ruqya* and *zar* documented in medical literature suggest that treatment methods built into the Islamic tradition around jinn can alleviate the afflictions of people who are possessed by these beings.

### *Psychiatry and jinn possession*

Despite documented examples of the efficacy of traditional therapies, there can still be danger in forgoing psychiatric care in favor of such treatments. Symptoms of mental disorders, particularly psychosis, can continue to worsen without biomedical intervention and so relying solely on traditional healing techniques can be dangerous for those with severe

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<sup>68</sup> Najat Khalifa and Tim Hardie, "Possession and jinn," *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 98 (2005): 352. One British Muslim of Pakistani descent who had severe cluster headaches and did not respond well to allopathic treatment found significant relief at the hands of a *raqi*. See Hamidi Abdul Rahman and Supyan Hussin, "Case Study of Using Ruqyah Complementary Therapy on a British Muslim Patient with Cluster Headache," *EMJED* 3, no. 1 (2021), 5.

<sup>69</sup> Yori Bilum, "Demonic explanations of disease among Moroccan Jews in Israel," *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 3 (1979), 370.

<sup>70</sup> Kennedy, "Nubian Zar Ceremonies as Psychotherapy," 190.

mental illness. One Omani man began experiencing altered personality and auditory hallucinations. He received traditional healing but it did not alleviate his symptoms and he became increasingly violent towards his family members. He sought care from psychiatrists, who determined that he suffered from softened brain tissue and impaired temporal lobe functioning. Upon pharmacological intervention, his condition improved dramatically and his psychotic symptoms receded; had he not received this care, his brain function would have almost certainly continued to deteriorate.<sup>71</sup> Additionally, some illnesses attributed to jinn are actually infections or other diseases which can critically worsen in a short period of time, making rapid medical intervention crucial. One woman who showed a high fever and confusion was given antibiotics by a doctor, but she declined to take them in favor of going to a local faith healer. Her condition deteriorated and was diagnosed weeks later with cerebral malaria.<sup>72</sup>

Some psychiatrists are advocating for holistic and respectful patient care for this very reason—they know the stakes are high. Current psychiatric literature is striving to understand the role of jinn belief and traditional healing methods in Muslim communities so that the patient feels comfortable with accepting medical treatment for a condition that they see as stemming from supernatural causes. Recent studies suggest that many possessed people seek psychiatric care in addition to *zar* or *ruqya*. These studies also show that respecting and integrating patient's beliefs about jinn can make them more comfortable with seeing medical

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<sup>71</sup> Amr A Guenedi et al., "Investigation of the cerebral blood flow of an Omani man with supposed 'spirit possession' associated with an altered mental state: a case report," *Journal of Medical Case Reports* 3, no. 1 (2009): 1-5.

<sup>72</sup> Khalifa and Hardie, "Possession and jinn," 352.

doctors. Pakistani psychiatrists Khan and Sanober warn that “Confronting or challenging the family’s religious and spiritual beliefs will likely hamper treatment and damage the rapport between family and health care provider.”<sup>73</sup> British psychiatrists Khalifa and Hardie note that Muslims constitute Britain’s largest ethnic minority and that “in this community there is widespread belief in jinn possession,” although the exact prevalence remains unknown.<sup>74</sup> A group of Dutch psychiatrists working with Muslim patients report that these patients often hesitate to share their belief about the source of their illness or a family member’s because they fear that a non-Muslim practitioner will not take them seriously.<sup>75</sup> If such fears are confirmed, people suffering from mental illness may choose to solely pursue treatment that integrates their beliefs about jinn and thus walk away from potentially critical biomedical intervention.

To combat this possibility, some psychiatric literature on jinn possession encourages cultural competency and even advocates for both standard psychiatric care and traditional treatments like *ruqya*. Lewis et al. emphasize the possibility of finding common ground between families and doctors who hold different explanations of an illness’s source. They find that focusing on treatment goals and integrating the beliefs and practices of the patient increases family engagement in treatment of adolescents with psychosis attributed to jinn

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<sup>73</sup> Qurat ul ain Khan and Aisha Sanober, “‘Jinn Possession’ and Delirious Mania in a Pakistani Woman,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 173, no. 3 (2016): 220.

<sup>74</sup> Khalifa and Hardie, “Possession and jinn,” 352.

<sup>75</sup> See Lim et al., “The Attribution of Mental Health Problems to Jinn,” 3.

possession, resulting in significantly improved long-term outcomes.<sup>76</sup> Other researchers suggest that collaborating with an imam can increase a patient's comfort with accepting biomedical treatment.<sup>77</sup>

For these authors, the goal of incorporating spiritual factors like Qur'anic recitation and the counsel of an imam is not wholesale acceptance of the patient's worldview; rather, it is to do what is necessary in order to get the patient to accept psychiatric treatment. As London psychiatrists Dein and Illaiee put it, "We emphasize the importance of embracing the service user's rationale of illness for them to accept medication."<sup>78</sup> This may seem like an overtly utilitarian approach; nevertheless, when psychiatrists make space for patient's attribution of their illness to jinn and encourage him or her to seek traditional treatments in addition to biomedical ones, patients are more likely to feel comfortable with the psychiatrist, follow their instructions, and experience better outcomes. In short, they heal better.

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<sup>76</sup> Lewis et al., "Jinn and Psychosis: Providing Culturally Informed Care to Muslim Adolescents and Families," *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 56, no. 6, (2017): 455-457.

<sup>77</sup> Anastasia Lim et al., "The Attribution of Mental Health Problems to Jinn," 6.

<sup>78</sup> Simon Dein and Abdool Samad Illaiee, "Jinn and mental health: looking at jinn possession in modern psychiatric practice," *The Psychiatrist* 37, no. 9 (2018).

## **Part II: The Beings Aboard the UFOs**

### *Aliens/Extraterrestrials: material beings of modernity*

Unlike the long, storied tradition of jinn with tales stretching back to pre-Islamic antiquity, the concept of aliens as UFO-piloting beings from another planet is relatively recent. “The extraterrestrial hypothesis,” or the belief that UFOs are connected to extraterrestrial beings, took root as a result of the Roswell myth, which alleges that US government personnel recovered alien corpses from a crashed flying saucer in 1947. Despite their relative newness to our society, however, ideas about aliens still hold a prominent place in American culture. Pasulka argues that the promulgation of such ideas owes much to the extensive media that has proliferated around stories of UFO sightings and alien contact, particularly within the United States. This modern-day American lore draws upon journalism coverage, TV shows and movies, urban legends, conferences, and individuals reporting their experiences on internet forums.<sup>79</sup> Even the US government has played a role in UFO and alien lore, including its own research on UFO reports, surveillance of UFO interest groups, and attempts to manage public perceptions of UFO phenomena—efforts which have cemented the US government within UFO culture as a keeper of alien secrets (and perhaps

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<sup>79</sup> Pasulka, *American Cosmic*, 120-152.

aliens themselves).<sup>80</sup> These stories help to shape understandings of what abduction entails, both among UFO research groups and the populace at large, foremost among them the belief that aliens are the ones conducting the abductions. Overall, ideas about aliens and UFOs reflect an epoch steeped in and facilitated by technological advancements.

Within the communities that share and circulate stories and beliefs of UFOs and aliens, there is a spectrum of ways that people experience UFOs and extraterrestrials (ETs). J. Allen Hynek, an astronomer and consultant for the Air Force's Project Blue Book (which collected and analyzed UFO reports from 1952-1969), devised the Close Encounter scale to organize UFO reports. A close encounter of the first kind is a UFO sighting at close range: in the second kind, the UFO has left material traces of some kind: and in the third kind, witnesses report "the presence of animated creatures."<sup>81</sup> Absent from the original scale, the close encounter of the fourth kind—abduction—was later added to address the growing number of reports of mysterious kidnappings in connection to UFO sightings.

These kidnapping beings are generally depicted as small and thin with oversized heads, enormous, slanted eyes, and gray skin—what Jacobs calls the "Small Grays."<sup>82</sup> But stories suggest that aliens are not limited to this appearance. John Carpenter, a social worker who worked with abductees, notes that although the Small Grays are the most common, there

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<sup>80</sup> For a truly wild ride about the feedback loop between the US Air Force and ufology, see Mark Pilkington, *Mirage Men: A Journey in Disinformation, Paranoia, and UFOs* (London: Constable and Robin, 2010), esp. 189-209.

<sup>81</sup> J. Allen Hynek, *The UFO Experience: A Scientific Inquiry* (Ballantine Books, 1972), 177. He used this language specifically in case UFO-related creatures were not living beings, but robots.

<sup>82</sup> C.D.B. Bryan, *Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind: A Reporter's Notebook on Alien Abduction, UFOs, and the Conference at M.I.T.* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 28.

is also a tall, blond “Nordic type” who is “kind and loving” and a reptilian being who is “sinister and deceptive.”<sup>83</sup> Eddie Bullard, a folklorist, found that out of 203 cases of beings involved in abduction, “137 are humanoid, 52 human, and 14 nonhuman” with most of the humanoids falling under the Small Gray or Nordic categories (although others are “mummy types, Michelin-man types. Others are hairy dwarfs, or trolls).”<sup>84</sup> Typically, the Small Grays do the busywork: snagging the abductee from her room, conducting any procedures, and leading her around the craft. A single, taller being—sometimes Nordic, sometimes not—may also be there to serve as leader and provide emotional support for the abductee.<sup>85</sup>

The astronomer Jacques Vallee’s collection of eyewitness accounts of UFOs and their related beings also describes entities resembling mummies and dwarves. According to his catalogue, UFO-related entities manifest in a wide variety of ways, including a ten-foot-tall man in a “white monklike suit”; a small man with bug eyes, no mouth, and long arms ending in claws; a hircine dwarf with eyes “as large as raven eggs”; figures with “joined legs and one large foot” that slid along the ground and had “towely” skin like mummies; and so on, for hundreds of sightings, with each one not quite like the last.<sup>86</sup>

Whether these entities are here to observe humanity’s actions, infiltrate society, or bestow beneficent supernatural aid depends on who you ask. Strieber, who came to view his

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 30. At this point in the conference, a woman shares that she saw a Nordic type trying on one of her high-heeled shoes.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>85</sup> John Mack, “How the Alien Abduction Phenomenon Challenges the Boundaries of Our Reality,” in *UFOs and Abductions: Challenging the Borders of Knowledge*, ed. David Jacobs (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000): 253.

<sup>86</sup> Vallee, *Passport to Magonia*, 256, 226, 203, 202.

abducting being as a muse, nevertheless states that “they are hard and uncompromising, and there is that unavoidable—and very real—sense of danger. Like owls, they are ominously beautiful, but also predatory creatures of the night.”<sup>87</sup> Vallee, while unconvinced that the phenomenon has any connection to extraterrestrial beings, firmly holds that it is inherently deceptive and thus dangerous. He asserts that UFOs could be instruments of purposeful manipulation on the part of unknown, technologically advanced entities (perhaps even human ones). He warns that “It is not only the individual contactee who is manipulated, but the global image in humanity’s collective psyche.”<sup>88</sup> He sees the beings who control UFOs as tricksters, not to be trusted.

In contrast, other witnesses report that these visitors are amicable and prone to friendly (if sometimes incomprehensible) conversation.<sup>89</sup> There are many reports of them reassuring humans by informing them of their philanthropic intentions. Many abductees say that their abductors are concerned for well-being of humans and Earth, and transmit messages about the necessity of mitigating environmental harm and promoting harmony among humans.<sup>90</sup> Edgar Mitchell, a former astronaut and MIT-educated astrophysicist, held that extraterrestrial beings dismantled weapons that were launched into space because they damaged both humans’ and extraterrestrials’ environments.<sup>91</sup> The beings aboard the UFOs

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<sup>87</sup> Whitley Streiber and Jeffrey J. Kripal, *The Supernatural: Why the Unexplained is Real* (New York: Penguin, 2017), 291.

<sup>88</sup> Jacques Vallee, *Messengers of Deception: UFO Contacts and Cults* (Brisbane: Daily Grail Publishing, 2008), 370.

<sup>89</sup> Vallee, *Magonia*, 270.

<sup>90</sup> Mack, *Abduction*, 408.

<sup>91</sup> Pasulka, 205-206.



show a range of dispositions, and can be hostile, morally ambiguous, or even genuinely concerned about the future of the human race.

*A short history of abductions*

Emmanuel Swedenborg, the 18th-century mystic, was one of the first to claim contact with extraterrestrial intelligences. There was no abduction involved; rather, the first accounts of extraterrestrial contact were built upon frameworks of theosophical beliefs developed by Swedenborg and others. New Age beliefs about alien contact incorporate many of the elements of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Swedenborgian theosophical ideas, such as channeling, higher consciousness, and spiritual advancement through the aid of non-earthly entities.

Theosophy reveres extraterrestrial beings who are highly technologically advanced and spiritually superior to humans, yet interested in humanity's spiritual well-being. Belief systems formed by contactees (what Christopher Partridge calls "UFO religions") hold similar themes of an advanced being who is beautiful, benevolent, and loving—a "Space Brother"—who makes contact with a human. This human is then tasked with spreading the message of love and higher consciousness to all of humanity so that they too can progress technologically and spiritually.<sup>92</sup> George Adamski, whom Denzler calls the "prototypical contactee," discussed religion, philosophy, and nuclear war with benevolent and Aryan-looking ETs who hailed from various parts of the solar system. Communing with them telepathically, he reported that they have vastly superior technological and spiritual capabilities, live in a peaceful utopia on their home planet, and came to share their

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<sup>92</sup> Christopher Partridge, "Understanding UFO Religions." *UFO Religions*, ed. Christopher Partridge (New York: Routledge, 2003): 18.

knowledge with humans in order to help our species advance.<sup>93</sup> His experiences share much in common with other contactees who have come forward in order to share messages from benevolent extraterrestrial intelligences. “Everything from war to natural disasters is related to the slow progress of human spiritual evolution,” according to these messages, and humanity must get its act together to save the world and take its place among the ascended masters.<sup>94</sup>

Contactees and accompanying UFO religions gained momentum in part due to the public interest in UFO sightings that took off in the latter half of the twentieth century. Historians of the UFO phenomenon generally identify the first modern UFO report as Kenneth Arnold’s sighting in 1947. A private pilot, Arnold was aloft in Washington state when he saw nine metallic objects flying by Mt. Rainier. Although his account is that the objects looked like crescents and moved like saucers skipping over water, an Associated Press reporter altered his words and reported that he saw “flying saucers.”<sup>95</sup> Thus the infamous (yet inaccurate, for Arnold’s case at least) terminology was born.

After flying saucers became national news in a jittery age of nuclear fears and Cold War suspicions, two major waves of UFO sightings occurred in the US, first in 1952 and again in 1965.<sup>96</sup> Two separate realms of inquiry developed: government entities and various

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<sup>93</sup> Denzler, *Lure of the Edge*, 42. Although many people, included members of UFO research groups, derided contactees as fame-seeking charlatans, there were critics who admitted that some, if not most, contactees seemed quite sincere in their beliefs.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, 21.

<sup>95</sup> Denzler, *Lure of the Edge*, 4.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

private groups dedicated to the collection and verification or debunking of UFO sighting reports, and UFO religions who communicated with benevolent extraterrestrial entities in order to raise humanity's collective consciousness.

The federal government and military took seriously eyewitness reports of UFOs, both from civilians and from their own military personnel, because of such crafts' potential ability to pose a threat to national security. Their most famous program was Project Blue Book, launched in 1952 under the auspices of the Air Force. Mysterious flying objects could be advanced Soviet tech heralding future destruction, and thus required careful scrutiny and explanation. Project Blue Book was thus tasked with collecting and analyzing reports. In 1953, it found that the explanation for some sightings remained unknown but were unlikely to be extraterrestrial in origin. In 1953, the CIA convened a secret committee to study UFO sightings and determined that UFOs posed a security threat only because they "created a climate of uncertainty among citizens that could be exploited by an enemy before launching a real attack."<sup>97</sup> Finding nothing meriting further scientific study in the data surveyed, the committee recommended a national media campaign to promote disbelief in UFOs and also covert surveillance of UFO communities. Perennially underfunded and understaffed, Project Blue Book was shuttered in 1969 and civilian UFO groups like MUFON (Mutual UFO Network) took up the task of collecting reports of UFO sightings.

Even as public interest in UFOs increased and the lore about ETs grew more complex, UFO researchers, both government and private, tended to dismiss abduction stories as nonsense. During its tenure, Project Blue Book had automatically placed all reports that included details about UFO landings and sightings of UFO occupants into a file labeled

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 14.

“C.P”—crackpot. Air Force personnel categorizing the reports assumed that anyone who claimed to interact with crafts or the beings on board was, by default, an unreliable source. The private ufology communities paid these reports little heed well until the 1960s, when their sheer volume convinced such groups that ignoring them would deprive ufologists of potential insight into UFO phenomena.<sup>98</sup>

The first known alien abduction report was in 1957 when a Brazilian farmer claimed that aliens pulled him from a field into a UFO, where he had sex with an attractive, yet strange, female alien. In 1966, the published account of the abduction of Betty and Barney Hill helped to publicize the abduction narrative in the US. They experienced “missing time” during a drive on a rural highway, developed strange rashes and warts afterwards, and underwent hypnosis to recover memories of that night. They reported being taken onto a spaceship and subjected to intrusive physical examinations. The common conceptualization of aliens as small gray beings with large heads and eyes—the “grays”—is traceable back to the Hills’ account. Barney Hill described the perpetrators as gray-skinned men with oval-shaped heads coming to a point at the chin, large eyes that stretched out to the sides of their heads, a thin, horizontal line of a mouth, and no hair. Interestingly, Betty described them as gray-skinned but with large noses and dark hair but her account did not garner momentum like her husband’s.<sup>99</sup>

In *Communion*, Whitley Streiber described his own abduction experience, which includes similar themes as the Hill’s story in addition to unpleasant sexual procedures. The cover of *Communion* features this now-classic alien face, with a long oval face, slit nose, and

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>99</sup> Vallee, *Passport to Magonia*, 101.

huge, black, slanted eyes.<sup>100</sup> Together, the Hills' and Streiber's abduction accounts informed the public's understanding about what an abduction narrative entails and popularized the quintessential image of the Small Gray as extraterrestrial UFO pilot.

In the typical abduction narrative, the victim is taken onboard a UFO and subjected to painful and often humiliating quasi-medical procedures. Oftentimes there is a sexual or reproductive element, as the beings harvest eggs or sperm, implant or remove fetuses, and sometimes perform sexual intercourse directly with the abductee.<sup>101</sup> Like the messages that contactees like Adamski receive from their extraterrestrial interlocutors, abductions will often include a conversation between human and ET, with the latter urging for widespread change in order to prevent impending ecological doom, or to foster peace among humankind.

By the 1990s, thousands of people had reported that they had been abducted by aliens.<sup>102</sup> Many underwent hypnosis, a process that was popularized by abduction researchers like Hopkins, Jacobs, and Mack as the means for accessing hidden parts of one's past.<sup>103</sup>

### *Abductions and hypnosis*

Someone who believes that they may have been abducted by aliens will often have what physician John Miller calls a "Realization Event." The Realization Event (RE) can be

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<sup>100</sup> Streiber, *Communion*. The original 1987 edition bears this now-famous face.

<sup>101</sup> Mack, *Abduction*, 126, 163; Brown, *They Know Us Better Than We Know Ourselves*, 92-99; David Halperin, *Intimate Alien: The Hidden Story of the UFO* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), 97.

<sup>102</sup> Halperin, *Intimate Alien*, 101.

<sup>103</sup> Out of eleven abductees that Clancy interviewed, eight had abduction memories emerge under hypnosis. Clancy, *Abducted*, 58.

the result of seeing unexplained marks on the body, losing a chunk of time, experiencing strange dreams or memory fragments, or even reading a book about abduction. In one case, a woman awoke on her couch to see a large, nonhuman being standing over her. She looked at the clock and realized two hours had passed, seemingly in an instant. She then discovered a large bruise and puncture wounds on her hip that did not match up with any furniture she might have bumped into.<sup>104</sup> This was her RE—her moment of realization that her strange dream was not a dream after all.

An RE “forces a person to suspect or decide that they have had an abduction experience.”<sup>105</sup> Believing that there may be more to uncover about their past, they seek out an abduction researcher or therapist who puts them into hypnosis and asks them questions. This is how the story of their abduction emerges—usually piecemeal, as the memories come out in disjointed fragments saturated with emotion. Abduction researchers Hopkins, Jacobs, and Mack typically saw their patients multiple times. Over the course of several sessions, they would help abductees add more details to their memories or uncover repeated instances of abduction. These researchers not only facilitated the emergence of memories of these events, but helped patients endure the strong emotional forces that might wrack them throughout the process and offer them support as they subsequently tried to figure out what such memories mean for their waking lives.

Many forms of therapy use hypnosis as a means for patients to overcome trauma and addiction. Hypnosis as a method for recovering repressed memories is controversial, however. Studies indicate that in hypnosis, the subject becomes highly suggestible and can

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<sup>104</sup> Bryan, *Close Encounters*, 39.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, 38.

be susceptible to the influence of leading questions. A comparison of the cases from 13 different abduction researchers concluded that investigators play a central role in influencing the construction of abduction narratives under hypnosis.<sup>106</sup> Recent psychological studies suggest that, as a research method, putting subjects into hypnosis and asking them questions is more of a co-creative imaginative endeavor than a truth serum. One psychologist notes, “If you go into a session expecting to recover memories of alien abduction that’s most likely what you’re going to get.”<sup>107</sup> Additionally, the abduction research and potential abductee likely hold pre-existing assumptions about what they will find during hypnosis. Susan Clancy, a psychological researcher on abduction, points out that “you won’t seek out such a person to help you ‘find your memories’ unless you already believe it’s possible.”<sup>108</sup>

So, what is happening when someone under hypnosis is recounting the details of an abduction by nonhuman entities? Are they creating false memories under the influence of a researcher who already believes that such abductions are real events and possibly even common ones?<sup>109</sup> Perhaps, but this explanation does not elucidate the abduction phenomenon as a whole. There are puzzling aspects that hypnosis in and of itself does not explain. For instance, many abduction narratives share common themes, contain fantastically diverse

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<sup>106</sup> Leonard S. Newman and Roy F. Baummeister, “Not Just Another False Memory: Further Thoughts on the UFO Abduction Phenomenon,” *Psychological Inquiry* 7, no. 2 (1996): 188.

<sup>107</sup> Steven Jay Lynn et. al., “Recalling the Unrecallable: Should Hypnosis be Used to Recover Memories in Psychotherapy?” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 6, no. 3 (1997), 79.

<sup>108</sup> Clancy, *Abducted*, 63.

<sup>109</sup> The Roper Poll, designed by Hopkins and Jacobs, estimated that over a half a million Americans might be abductees. When they presented their findings at the M.I.T. conference on abductions, it resulted in “an uproar.” Bryan, *Close Encounters*, 46.

details, and, occasionally, are corroborated by witnesses. Additionally, there are abductees whose memories did not come from hypnosis.<sup>110</sup>

D.C. Donderi, a psychologist who attended the 1997 M.I.T conference on abductions, rejects the notion that abductions are “some sort of hypnotic confabulation egged on by investigators.” At the same conference, Jenny Randles, director of investigations for the British UFO Research Association, presented a study which had asked people to make up abduction stories and then compared them to narratives recounted by abductees. The study found that “people who are asked to describe imaginary abductions do *not* come up with the scenarios, sequences, or Beings described by the overwhelming majority of abductees.”<sup>111</sup> This suggests that, even if they are creating abduction memories during hypnosis, abductees are not simply drawing upon a collective, unconscious pool of science fiction imagery to inform their accounts.

Additionally, there is a consistency across their reports that abduction researchers argue contradicts the notion that abductees are simply making it all up. Despite the fact that one would imagine pop culture depictions of aliens to bleed into hypnotically-retrieved recollections, none of the hundreds of people that Hopkins worked with reported seeing ray guns or other weapons during their abduction. Onboard the crafts, they did not see areas designated for physical functions like eating, lounging, or going to the bathroom; they did not see their kidnapper beings eat or drink: and the physical exams that they were subjected to

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 53-58. Carol, who was on the abductee panel at the M.I.T. conference, did not undergo hypnosis yet recalls multiple instances of interacting with entities. Hopkins worked with patients whose abductions had witnesses; see Hopkins, “Hypnosis and Abduction Accounts,” *UFOs and Abductions*: 224-225.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 49.



focused almost exclusively on the head and reproductive systems.<sup>112</sup> Folklorist Thomas Bullard compared abduction accounts that were recounted both with and without the use of hypnosis. There is consistency across accounts: Bullard identifies a maximum of eight different episodes within the abduction narrative, with two-thirds to three-quarters of narratives including some combination of those episodes within a set order.<sup>113</sup> He also concludes that “the details of UFO abduction memories are independent of the use of hypnosis.”<sup>114</sup>

Hopkins points to abductions with multiple participants as evidence that something more is happening than simple false memory creation. His patients Karen and her partner Richard shared a UFO sighting followed by missing time. They underwent hypnosis separately and produced corroborating accounts. Karen reported seeing an alien touch Richard’s hand, upon which he started floating and looked out of a window. Without having heard Karen’s account, Richard detailed the same event during his own hypnotic session.<sup>115</sup>

These issues indicate that hypnotic confabulation is quite possibly a mechanism for the creation of abduction events but does not explain them entirely. Thematic consistency across accounts, multiple-participant abductions, and eyewitness accounts complicate the hypothesis that abductees and their hypnotizers summon fantastical stories out of the

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<sup>112</sup> Hopkins, “Hypnosis and Abduction Accounts,” *UFOs and Abductions*, 228-229.

<sup>113</sup> Thomas E. Bullard, “UFO Abduction Reports: The Supernatural Kidnap Narrative Returns in Technological Guise,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 102, no. 404 (1989): 153.

<sup>114</sup> Newman and Baumeister, “Not Just Another False Memory,” 187. The eight content categories are “order of events, appearance of craft, characteristics of the beings, examination, communication with beings, mental/physical effects,” and aftereffects.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 230-231.

subconscious ether. In any case, it is evident that abduction narratives reflect some form of a real experience. Benjamin Simon, the psychiatrist who performed hypnosis for Betty and Barney Hill, states that the role of hypnosis in the elucidation of abduction events “is a pathway to the truth as it is felt, and understood by the patient.”<sup>116</sup> Even the skeptical psychiatrist James S. Gordon, after attending the hypnotic sessions of several abductees, acknowledged that “clearly *something* had happened to these people, something powerful, strange, and transformative.”<sup>117</sup> The question is, what do such experiences mean for those who hold them?

Like jinn possession, abduction cannot be reduced to a state of delusion or self-deception. It actively influences a person’s physical and mental wellbeing, and holds lasting, even lifelong effects for those who experience it. Even the most hardheaded skeptic cannot dismiss abduction memories as irrelevant fantasy because, regardless of their origin, these memories can permanently alter the trajectory of someone’s life course and change their worldview drastically. This fact indicates that abductees are not victims of pseudoscience, stitching together subconscious pop culture fragments to make a Frankenstein-sob-story serving their need for attention or projecting their distrust of government onto alien beings. Rather, they are participants in a religious experience, an exchange between humans and mysterious entities who offer wisdom and reassurance, but are not always gentle with the ones they choose to share it with.

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<sup>116</sup> Brown, *They Know Us*, 29.

<sup>117</sup> Halperin, *Intimate Alien*, 108.

### *Abduction as religious experience*

The damaging power of contact with aliens is well-attested to in the reports of experiencers who suffer psychological and sometimes physical damage as a result. Vallee notes: “The experience of a close encounter with a UFO is a shattering mental and physical ordeal. The trauma has effects that go far beyond what the witnesses recall consciously.”<sup>118</sup> Some abductees, especially those who unwillingly participate in scientific procedures involving their reproductive organs, describe their experiences as nightmares come to life. One said, “It’s like monsters are coming to get me. But they’re real. There’s nothing I can do about it.”<sup>119</sup> They compare their experiences to those of rape victims, repeatedly emphasizing the powerlessness, confusion, and pain that they feel during their time inside the aliens’ ships. Psychological research shows that abduction experiences generate emotional responses similar to those of trauma victims.<sup>120</sup>

Despite the pain and trauma, however, contact with the beings aboard the UFOs can be a catalyst for moral and spiritual transformation. Adamski and other contactees hoped to spread a message of humanity united in brotherly love and spiritual growth; this message is a common theme in stories of contact with extraterrestrial intelligences. Pasulka asserts that “A UFO sighting or event often has the effect of completely changing the direction of one’s life, much like a religious conversion experience.”<sup>121</sup> She tells the story of one man, Rey, who

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<sup>118</sup> Vallee, *Messengers*, 16.

<sup>119</sup> John Mack, *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens* (New York: Macmillan, 1994), 146.

<sup>120</sup> Richard J. McNally et. al., “Psychophysiological Responding During Script-Driven Imagery in People Reporting Abduction by Space Aliens,” *Psychological Science* 15, no. 7 (2004): 493.

<sup>121</sup> Pasulka, *American Cosmic*, 185.

was an atheist before his UFO experience. After receiving the news that their cherished dog was sick and would need to be euthanized, Rey and his wife saw a metallic floating object in their living room, after which the dog was miraculously cured. He says, “Right there my whole worldview was totally shattered.”<sup>122</sup> Subsequently, he received a message during an out-of-body experience that he needed “to present to humanity the relationship between the nonhuman intelligences that were interacting with him, the spirit world, and the physics of consciousness.”<sup>123</sup> Rey formed the Foundation for Research into Extraterrestrial Encounters and began to study quantum physics in his newfound quest. Pasulka presents his story as a UFO-as-hierophany motif in which the phenomenon operates as an “inexplicable, sacred event” which has the power to heal and inspire.<sup>124</sup>

Some humans draw not just spiritual but intellectual support from their contact with extraterrestrial beings. Two scientists that Pasulka interviewed, both successful researchers and inventors who have contributed significantly to their fields, attribute their creativity to a superhuman intelligence from which they download information as if their brains are hard drives.<sup>125</sup> One scientist believes that “his connection to off-planet intelligence helps him create biotechnologies” by implanting memories of these technologies into his brain, which he then develops into products such as cancer-fighting medical treatments.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 188-189.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 197.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, 242.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 69-72. This parallels the scientific language that UFO religions used to describe their communication with benevolent alien beings.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 35.

Abductions, as the apogee of contact with the alien other, hold potential for lasting beneficial impacts on the lives of those taken aboard a UFO. Despite the traumatic nature of most abduction narratives, Mack notes that many of his patients “appear to undergo profound personal growth and transformation” as the result of their abductions.<sup>127</sup> Joe, one of Mack’s patients, explains the outcome of his interactions with aliens: “I have felt much more centered and grounded. It is much easier and cleaner to discern what is best for me—how I can best love and honor myself...I feel my ET guides have been playing a big role in this and they want me ‘whole and healed...’”<sup>128</sup>

The fact that Mack’s patients find spiritual succor in their abductions may be a reflection of Mack’s own New Age-influenced beliefs about the nature of reality. He held that “the deepest message of the encounters was not in their trauma but in their transformational aspects,” their ability to foster spiritual growth as a pathway to the divine.<sup>129</sup> Abduction researchers influence the memories that their clients create under hypnosis, and the trajectory of Mack’s questions likely served to “inadvertently help fill in some of the details” while his patients crafted their narratives through hypnosis.<sup>130</sup> However, even those who sought hypnosis from researchers who hold more negative views about abducting beings still experience positive aftereffects. David Jacobs, who, like Mack, affirms the reality of abductions but is significantly less optimistic about aliens’ intentions, nevertheless finds that

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<sup>127</sup> Mack, *Abduction*, 398.

<sup>128</sup> Mack, *Abduction*, 191.

<sup>129</sup> Ralph Blumenthal, *The Believer: Alien Encounters, Hard Science, and the Passion of John Mack*. (Albuquerque: High Road Press, 2021): 244.

<sup>130</sup> Newman and Baumeister, “Not Just Another False Memory,” 188.

many abductees “found spiritual enlightenment and an expansion of their consciousness.”<sup>131</sup> Clancy confirms that the abductees she interviewed gained meaning and value from their experiences. She states, “Their lives improved. They were less lonely, more hopeful about the future, felt they were better people.”<sup>132</sup> Bader’s study of abduction support groups found that an overwhelming majority of abductees find positive aspects to their experiences.<sup>133</sup>

Additionally, the intersection of pain and spiritual growth finds a parallel in some shamanic traditions. Bullard notes the similarity between the surgical procedures of abduction, wherein people are implanted with mysterious devices and have unknown parts of themselves removed, and shamanic initiation rituals where, within a trance state, an initiate experiences dismemberment and reformation. For example, one shaman recounted that his eyes were torn out by spirits; the abductee Betty Andreasson reported that her eyeball was pulled out of its socket so that the being could implant a device into her head.<sup>134</sup> After her ordeal, the being told Andreasson, a lifelong Christian, that it had chosen her “to show the world” because of her faith in Jesus.<sup>135</sup> For both the shaman and Andreasson, the physical

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<sup>131</sup> Partridge, “Understanding UFO Religions,” *UFO Religions*, 27.

<sup>132</sup> Clancy, *Abducted*, 149.

<sup>133</sup> Christopher D. Bader, “Supernatural Support Groups: Who are the UFO Abductees and Ritual-Abuse Survivors?” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 4 (2003): 676.

<sup>134</sup> Bullard, “UFO Abduction Reports,” 162-163.

<sup>135</sup> Denzler, *Lure of the Edge*, 125-126.

pain was a necessary catalyst for spiritual growth and the prerequisite for the responsibility of becoming a spiritual leader.<sup>136</sup>

It is because of their capacity to spur spirituality and personal transformation that we can categorize abductions as religious experiences. Christopher Partridge asserts that “It is arguable that the majority of abduction narratives are essentially religious narratives.”<sup>137</sup> William James, an early-20<sup>th</sup>-century founding figure of religious studies and psychology, notes that, in the self-surrender that marks the conversion experience, one finds “the idea of an immediate spiritual help, experienced by the individual in his forlornness and standing in no essential need of doctrinal apparatus or propitiatory machinery.”<sup>138</sup> Thence comes the UFO to swoop in, scoop someone up (always individually), and provide a spiritual experience with no accompanying machinery except that which powers the UFO. Noting the specifically modern character of abductions, Clancy states that “Being abducted by aliens may be a baptism into the new religion of our technological age.”<sup>139</sup> Belief in alien abductions can be a new framework for religious experience that integrates modern language and symbols and offers adherents the possibility for meaning-creation and personal transformation.

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<sup>136</sup> Halperin draws a parallel between shamanic journeys and the process of putting an abductee into hypnosis; for him, the descent into hypnosis is like the descent into the spiritual underworld, wherein the UFO “is itself the goal.” Halperin, *Intimate Alien*, 128-129.

<sup>137</sup> Partridge, *UFO Religions*, 27.

<sup>138</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Random House, 1902): 207.

<sup>139</sup> Clancy, *Abducted*, 155.

The beings aboard the UFOs provide a path for spirituality that is legible to a modern era circumscribed by technology and the championing of scientific rationalism. Brown asserts that abductees seek to rewrite reality by pushing against the material boundaries of the world accepted by science. “In this sense, belief in alien abduction resembles religion in its effort to transcend the worldly, to suggest the existence of mystery, magic, and some sort of higher power or powers.”<sup>140</sup> However, they are not denying modern physical science, but rather integrating it into their spiritual beliefs, which integrate the language of such science. Denzler states that “For many people in the UFO community, seeing previously unseen worlds in the form of UFOs and their occupants is not a matter belonging to the realm of faith and religious but is an event fundamentally consonant with a scientific worldview.”<sup>141</sup> Abductions, then, can subvert potential dissonance between sincerely held scientific and spiritual beliefs. They are religious experiences, pulling abductees into a spiritual realm and connecting them with a force bigger than themselves without challenging the rationalist paradigm of modern thought.

### *Mental health and abductions*

Unlike the phenomenon of jinn possession, there is not a movement within mental health medicine to respect the phenomenon of abduction and integrate accompanying beliefs into treatment for abductees with mental illness. Instead, psychologists and psychiatrists have sought to understand abduction through the lens of pathology. Because abduction

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<sup>140</sup> Brown, *They Know Us Better*, 206.

<sup>141</sup> Denzler, *Lure of the Edge*, 157.



experiences are religious experiences, pathologizing these experiences is detrimental to abductees who hold their memories as sources of spiritual succor.

To be clear, the fields of psychology and psychiatry are not in agreement whether or not abduction experiences constitute symptoms of mental illness in the first place, despite their focus on pathologizing such experiences. One psychiatric researcher examining abductees asserts that “The phenomenon of alien abduction, in the absence of scientific evidence, must be considered to have a psychopathological matrix.”<sup>142</sup> He states that the majority of his subjects have delusional disorder—a condition wherein someone holds a false belief despite evidence to the contrary. His argument is essentially that because abductees believe they have been abducted, they must be mentally ill, and their mental illness is their belief that they have been abducted. This circular reasoning could arguably be applied to anyone who holds a religious belief that is not supported by external evidence, however, and his opinion is contradicted by other psychiatrists and psychologists who hold that abductees, as a group, are not more prone to psychopathology.<sup>143</sup>

Attempts to categorize and pathologize abductees also focus on certain psychological personality traits that abductees exhibit more frequently than normal populations. However, researchers also come to different conclusions about what these traits might be. Kinne and Bhanot state that abductees often have “above-average intelligence,”<sup>144</sup> while Perrotta links

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<sup>142</sup> Giulio Perrotta, “Clinical evidence in the phenomenon of Alien Abduction,” *Annals of Psychiatry & Treatment* 7, no. 1 (2021), 110.

<sup>143</sup> Patricia Kinne and Venna Bhanot, “I’ve been abducted by aliens,” *Current Psychiatry* 7, no. 7 (2005): 82.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

abduction experiences to “to a medium-low or not fully educated cultural level.”<sup>145</sup> Clancy suggests that abductees tend towards fantasy-proneness,<sup>146</sup> but a study on the fantasy-proneness of abductees found that they were no more prone to fantasies than the control group.<sup>147</sup> The same study also suggests that “abductees are no different from others in most aspects of their basic personality.”<sup>148</sup> The lack of agreement on what kind of personality we might expect to find in someone who claims to have been abducted suggests that there is no specific psychological profile for abductees, just as there is no specific psychological profile for those who claim to be possessed by jinn or, for that matter, those who claim to interact with nonhuman entities in general.

The disagreement among psychologists and psychiatrists about the pathology of abduction experiences and the psychological profiles of abductees indicates that such experiences resist reduction to mere mental dysfunction. Those who seek to understand abductees through the lens of psychopathology fail to understand the religious significance of abduction narratives. Abduction functions for many if not most abductees as a religious experience, transforming their lives and giving them a sense of meaning and purpose. Although they often contain disturbing and frightening elements, so too do meaningful spiritual experiences in other traditions, like shamanic initiation. To discount abduction

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<sup>145</sup> Perrotta, “Clinical evidence in the phenomenon of Alien Abduction,” 111.

<sup>146</sup> Clancy, *Abduction*, 134.

<sup>147</sup> Peter Hough and Paul Rodgers, “Individuals Who Report Being Abducted by Aliens: Investigating the Differences in Fantasy Proneness, Emotional Intelligence and the Big Five Personality Factors,” *Imagination, Cognition, and Personality* 27, no. 2 (2007): 154.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid*, 155.

experiences as mere delusion and unnecessarily pathologize them is counterproductive and degrading, and thus is more likely to negatively impact abductees' mental health than do it any good.

Like patients who suffer from mental illness that they believe to be caused by jinn possession respond better to practitioners who respect their beliefs, so too should mental health professionals respect the perspectives of people who claim to have been abducted. However, the contrast between psychiatric and psychological approaches to jinn possession and alien abduction is telling. Whereas the former is given a delineated place as a "common cultural concept of distress," with practitioners urged to respect patient's beliefs and integrate traditional treatments like *ruqya*, abduction is accorded no such respect.<sup>149</sup> At most, practitioners are urged to not directly contradict patient's beliefs yet still explore pathological reasons for abduction memories. One psychiatry journal encourages psychiatrists to treat patients reporting alien abduction experiences by "exploring the experiences in a supportive, respectful manner" in addition to identifying possible pathologies like sleep paralysis.<sup>150</sup> This disparity in the treatment of two different modes of religious experience might stem from the fact that jinn exist within a well-defined, historically rich, religious and cultural context that mental health professionals can easily distance from modern medicine. However, abductions, ETs, and UFOs employ scientifically-informed language and themes, employ examinations which parallel modern medical procedures, and are both historically and geographically centered in modern-day Western society. Medicinal researchers might find it harder to

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<sup>149</sup> Lim et al., "Attribution of Mental Health Problems to Jinn," 1.

<sup>150</sup> Kinne and Bhanot, "'I've been abducted by aliens,'" 81.

distance themselves from these ideas and thus are more uncomfortable with the idea of humoring them, even (and perhaps especially) as a form of spirituality.

### **Part III: Implications of Possession and Abduction for Mental Health Practices**

#### *Spirituality and mental health therapies*

I have shown that traditional treatments for jinn possession—what Kennedy called “emotional therapies”—embody healing potentialities despite their epistemological distance from the materialist underpinnings of modern science. Islamic healers wielding the sacred words of the Qur’an are capable of reversing destructive personality changes. *Zar* ceremonies can treat hysteria, depression, and even psychosis. For abductees, hypnosis can reduce anxiety by helping them better understand their past and providing fuel to feed a newfound spiritual flame.<sup>151</sup> Furthermore, these “emotional therapies” can operate in harmony with psychological and psychiatric methods, helping patients to feel more comfortable with their treatment and achieve better healing outcomes overall.

If modern medicine can collaborate with spiritually-based treatments that contradict materialistic rationalism, how might this relationship develop? Instead of psychology and psychiatry begrudgingly making space for non-scientific treatment modalities in addition to their own standard procedures, might they instead acknowledge the healing power of such “emotional therapies” and willingly integrate them into their practices?

In Kennedy’s analysis of *zar* ceremonies, he said that *zar* might well be more effective than Western psychotherapy. Musing on the basis of its efficacy, he notes that faith and group support play a role in why it functions so well. He goes on to suggest: “It might

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<sup>151</sup> Perrotta, “Clinical Evidence in the Phenomenon of Alien Abduction,” 108.

even be suggested that dependence on the zar, shown by the lifetime linking with a spirit, is a viable and functional adjustment *under conditions of more or less perpetual stress*.<sup>152</sup>

Jinn possession and its management through *zar* is a method for dealing with the constant stress of modern life through a permanent linkage with a spiritual entity and regular participation in rituals involving that spirit. Similarly, abductees often believe that the same alien takes them multiple times throughout their life and some report feeling a strong bond to their alien companion.<sup>153</sup> In this sense, they also forge a lifelong link to a supernatural being. Abduction support groups and UFO communities give them group support, and their encounters with aliens give them faith in a universe pregnant with cosmic significance, a universe that interacts with them personally every time they are taken aboard a UFO.

Faith, group support, and a persistent link to a spiritual entity lay the foundation for the healing efficacy of *zar* and abduction narratives. They provide emotional outlets and spiritual support for people floundering through a life inundated by the incessant stimulation and anxieties of modernity. They open spaces of refuge from the constant stress that is our birthright as humans in the modern age. And they can provide relief for people suffering from depression, anxiety, and even psychosis—debilitating mental states that are becoming increasingly prevalent worldwide, as rates of major depressive disorder, anxiety disorder, and suicide risk rose significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>154</sup> Such therapies bridge the

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<sup>152</sup> Kennedy, “Nubian Zar Ceremonies,” 193.

<sup>153</sup> Bader, “UFO Abduction Support Groups,” *Alien Worlds*, 303.

<sup>154</sup> Winkler, P et al. “Increase in prevalence of current mental disorders in the context of COVID-19: analysis of repeated nationwide cross-sectional surveys.” *Epidemiology and psychiatric sciences* 29, e173 (2020): 1.

gap of science and religion by purposefully sowing spirituality into their treatments in order to improve mental-spiritual health outcomes.

These therapies are not the only ones linking body, mind, and spirit in order to treat certain conditions. The twelve-step program in Alcoholics Anonymous encourages members to “turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him* [emphasis in original]” in order to gain control over alcoholism.<sup>155</sup> AA understands alcoholism as an illness with a spiritual dimension and, as such, requires spiritual intervention to overcome. Surrender to divine will, self-reflection, prayer, and meditation deepen the connection between the alcoholic and a higher power. The ultimate goal of the twelve-step program (occurring somewhere in between steps eleven and twelve) is spiritual awakening, by which power the alcoholic overcomes their illness and is “set on a path which tells him he is really going somewhere, that life is not a dead end, not something to be endured or mastered.”<sup>156</sup> In this language, one can see the reflection of the anxiety of a modern human, grappling with a meaningless world of dead matter, and the solution presented by AA—a spiritual awakening which, ideally, treats not only the symptom of alcoholism but the underlying condition of insufficient connection to a higher power.

The efficacy of the twelve steps is not solely in their ability to aid those struggling with alcoholism, but also in their capacity to guide people towards a sense of purpose in their lives. Recent developments in the field of psychedelic therapy also explore the healing power of this phenomenon. In weaving together mental health, psychotropic drugs, and spirituality,

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<sup>155</sup> Bill Wilson, *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (New York: The A.A. Grapevine, Inc. and Alcoholics Anonymous Publishing, 2005): 34-35.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid*, 107.

psychedelic therapy represents the nascent potential of future therapeutic practices which treat both mind and soul—practices which echo the mechanisms of *zar*, *ruqya*, and hypnosis.

### *Psychedelics, spirituality, and mental health*

Psychiatry and psychology are moving in the direction of spiritual integration through the advent of psychedelic therapy. Researchers who gave psilocybin (the psychedelic molecule in mushrooms) to volunteers with treatment-resistant depression found that, after a week, “all of the volunteers showed improvement in their symptoms, and two-thirds of them were depression-free, in some cases for the first time in years.”<sup>157</sup> (Half of the volunteers had symptoms again after six months, however, suggesting that the treatment needs to be repeated—not unlike *zar* or abductions.) A study of terminal cancer patients given LSD found that for many of them, their trip mitigated their fear of death or lifted it entirely. Two months after his LSD experience, even though he was dying, one patient said that he felt himself to be “the luckiest man on earth.”<sup>158</sup>

Psychedelics’ efficacy for treating mental health disorders is not based solely on chemical interactions. They are not simply drugs, but also facilitators of spiritual experience. In one study of people who had used DMT (the main active ingredient in ayahuasca), researchers found that the DMT experience had massive, lasting effects on users’ worldviews: “More than half of those who identified as atheist before the experience no longer identified as atheist afterwards.” Users reported that their DMT experiences were

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid, 376.

<sup>158</sup> Michael Pollan, *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence* (Penguin Books, 2018): 346-347.



“among the most meaningful, spiritual, and psychologically insightful lifetime experiences” of their life.<sup>159</sup> The ability of drugs like MDMA, psilocybin, and LSD to foment positive change for mental health is an index of their ability to create a sense of spirituality. An analysis of two trials of psilocybin-assisted psychotherapy notes that “in both trials, the degree to which the psilocybin session induced a mystical experience was found to correlate positively with the effects on anxiety and mood.”<sup>160</sup> When facilitated properly, the effects of psychedelic therapy can be durable, with one study finding significant reductions in anxiety and depression even four and a half years later.<sup>161</sup>

Carlos Alberto Seguin, in his study of folklore psychiatry, noted the role that psychotropic plants had in native Peruvian healing practices. But he also identified other mechanisms undergirding traditional treatments, like group settings, strong social and cultural ties between the healer and the patient, shared expectations, and the unfurling of all of these elements within a “magic-mystical atmosphere.”<sup>162</sup> In order to be effective, therapies cannot simply toss psychoactive plants at a patient; they must integrate these same elements if they seek to attain effective healing power.

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<sup>159</sup> Alan Davis et al., “Survey of entity encounter experiences occasioned by inhaled *N,N*-dimethyltryptamine: Phenomenology, interpretation, and enduring effects,” *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 34, no. 9 (2020): 1008. Interestingly, in this and other DMT accounts, many users report seeing aliens who act as friendly interlocutors and guides. See Rick Strausman, *DMT: The Spirit Molecule*, (Park Street Press, 2000).

<sup>160</sup> Franklin King IV and Rebecca Hammond, “Psychedelics as Reemerging Treatments for Anxiety Disorders: Possibilities and Challenges in a Nascent Field,” *Focus* 19, no. 2 (2021): 195.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> Seguin, “Folklore Psychotherapy,” 295.

Psychiatrists offering psychedelic therapy thus face the tricky task of providing a mystical experience for patients while still operating as representatives of modern medicine and its materialist-rationalist paradigm. They must seek a balance between the spiritual and the scientific, playing both shaman and physician, in order to maximize the curative powers of psychedelics. These fields are already integrating spirituality into biomedical treatment via psychedelic therapy and witnessing extraordinary outcomes. A group setting, strong relationship between healer and patient, shared expectations, and environment amenable to mysticism are all mechanisms shared by *zar*, *ruqya*, and, arguably, hypnotic sessions as well. These mechanisms in combination with psychedelics could form a new framework for treatment modalities potent enough to combat the mental health crises of the modern age.

## Conclusion

In the preceding sections, I demonstrated that traditional healing methods like *zar* and *ruqya* are able to benefit patients suffering from jinn possession. For abductees, hypnosis functions as a healing mechanism which elucidates the cause behind strange dreams, unexplained wounds, missing time, and other abnormalities through producing memories of abduction events. These techniques are effective because they allow for the ontological reality of the nonhuman entities causing distress or strange symptoms in the one seeking treatment. Conversely, if a treatment modality does not accept the reality of possession or abduction, it will be less effective. Psychiatric intervention for jinn possession can be effective, but if a psychiatrist dismisses the patient's explanation that jinn are to blame, the patient is more likely to refuse treatment. Psychologists who pathologize abduction attempt to identify mental illness where there is none. Categorizing a jinn- or ET-touched patient merely as a victim of anxiety, PTSD, or another mental illness in the DSM-5-TR does not suffice to promote healing because such diagnoses reduce religious experiences to medical conditions to be solved with medication and/or psychotherapy. They do not recognize the powerful and persistent impact that possession and abduction have on people's inner worlds.

The challenge that psychology and psychiatry face, in the form of the possessed and abducted, is an epistemological paradigm that does not fully track with scientific rationalism. Through communication with or manipulation by spiritual beings, people who have been possessed or abducted transcend the social and cultural boundaries of the modern world. Rituals and healers employing both physical and spiritual mechanisms help to return these people to their proper functionality so that they can successfully exist in society, yet their experiences form a lasting connection to something larger than themselves. Successful

treatments for possession and abduction thus integrate spirituality, since the experiences themselves are spiritual ones.

These treatments do not only use spiritual aspects, though, but also physical ones. *Zar*, *ruqya*, and hypnosis all utilize physical practices in order to effect changes in a patient's interiority. *Ruqya* involves physical actions on the part of the *raqi*, like touching the patient and sometimes lightly tapping them with a stick.<sup>163</sup> *Zar* is a highly physical event, with dancing, drumming, placing coins into one's mouth, and even dressing up and acting out behaviors associated with certain spirits.<sup>164</sup> A hypnotic trance is a physical state of being, as it puts the body into a state of deep relaxation. During sessions, abduction researchers will closely watch the body of their patients to note physical reactions while the patient is narrating their actions in abduction events.<sup>165</sup> These interventions are not restricted to the physical realm, but are understood to have significant impacts on the internal, spiritual worlds of those whom they treat. *Ruqya* and *zar* aim to heal the trauma of jinn possession by controlling the jinn and reducing its ability to influence the possessee. Abduction researchers help patients undergo spiritually-charged abduction experiences through hypnosis, thus rendering a tool used for facilitating spiritual development. Utilizing physicality in a healing practice in order to affect internal, spiritual change is thus a hallmark of efficacious treatments for possession and abduction.

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<sup>163</sup> Eneborg, "*Ruqya Shariya*," 1090.

<sup>164</sup> Al-Shahi, "Spirit possession and healing," 34-37.

<sup>165</sup> Mack connects the patient's physical movement during hypnotic sessions to spiritual movement, stating that "The bodily responses seem quite literally to drive the experience into new realms of psychical awareness."

Mack, *Abduction*, 402.

This modality is not limited to patients of *zar*, *ruqya*, or hypnosis though. Through integrating spirituality into modern mental health practice, healers within all epistemological paradigms, even that of scientific rationalism, can better aid their patients. The promising results of psychedelic therapy offer something more than the evolution of the psychiatric field. They offer hope—a potential release from the anxieties and stresses of the world for those who cannot find relief on their own. They also offer a release from the restrictions of scientific rationalism on the fields of psychology and psychiatry. A future of mental health which incorporates spirituality could treat those possessed by jinn or by addiction; it could also support those who experience abduction by aliens or by their own unendurable existential angst. It might successfully harness what Kennedy called the “still dimly understood forces of the human psyche” in order to better heal people stricken with mental illness or simply overwhelmed by the stressors of modern life. And it might encourage modern humanity as a whole to hold an open mind towards nonhuman entities and their potential to affect real change, even if they are of a disputed ontological status—what El-Zein calls “‘differently’ real.”<sup>166</sup>

The argument that I have made here is focused on jinn and the beings that some people understand to be aliens. It demonstrates that mental health practitioners who integrate a patient’s beliefs about their interactions with a nonhuman entity will experience better treatment outcomes than if they dismiss those beliefs. Some psychiatrists and psychologists may feel uneasy at this proposition if they sense a threat to a worldview (and, to some degree, a profession) built on the foundation of scientific rationalism. How, then, to honestly, if tentatively, accept claims about nonhuman, spiritual entities in order to better help

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<sup>166</sup> El-Zein, *World of the Jinn*, 135.

patients? I would suggest adopting a philosophy of pragmatism. William James asserted that “God is real because he produces real effects.”<sup>167</sup> If one accepts that proposition, then one would be hard-pressed indeed to argue that jinn and the beings aboard the UFOs are *not* real.

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<sup>167</sup> James, *Religious Experience*, 507.

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