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D.W. Pasulka’s American Cosmic: UFOs, Religion, Technology is an ethnography that focuses on several lesser-known aspects of the religious-like facets of UFO culture. Across seven chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion, Pasulka narrates a series of experiences with scientists and academics who have become UFO believers, using several innovative theoretical and methodological frames to describe and to analyze her material. The purpose of the book is not an updated or new analysis of UFO religions; in fact, scholars expecting such material from this book will be disappointed, as there is little to no discussion or analysis of more conventionally understood UFO-inspired religious movements such as Heaven’s Gate or the Raëlian movement. Rather, Pasulka’s central concern is an exploration of technology and human experience. As Pasulka puts it, “This is a book about UFOs and technology, but also about a group of people who believe anomalous technology functions as creative inspiration” (xii). American Cosmic is not the book to assign to teach classic UFO religious movements. But, as an exploration of new modes of religiosity and spirituality, the book provides plenty of food for thought.

The “Introduction” describes two central issues for this book. The first is the status of Pasulka’s informants. Pasulka discovered that many UFO believers are, in fact, respectable scientists and academics. This, in turn, has two effects on how Pasulka presents the ethnography. First, because so many people perceive UFO believers to be “cranks and weirdos,” many scientists and academics in UFO communities maintain their anonymity. She writes, “The participants are anonymous because of the stigma that is often associated with UFOs and belief in them.” But, because many of her informants were also part of “classified government programs in which the phenomenon was studied,” Pasulka maintains their anonymity to protect their jobs (3). Because Pasulka is not centrally concerned with the personal experiences of her informants,

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the anonymity of informants is probably less important than it might be in a different type of book about UFOs and technology. Perhaps it is the case that a book about UFOs and technology will necessarily raise the credulity hackles of many readers. However, given that many of the stories throughout the book will, at the very least, spark great curiosity for readers, and given Pasulka’s very close relationship with one informant (Tyler, to whom the book is dedicated), the anonymous informants should prompt readers to carefully consider what is central to Pasulka’s argument.

The second issue in the “Introduction” is the development of the research and methodology choices Pasulka made throughout the book. Here, she is on much more solid, religious studies ground. Her use of religious studies methods and analytic tools to examine UFOs and technology is compelling, especially for scholars looking for ways to think about the religious aspects of practices and experiences conventionally understood not to be religious. Starting in the “Introduction,” and running throughout the book, she describes the religious nature of the contact event, the formation of belief communities based on such events, and the role of technology in creating new beliefs. She also argues that questions about the reality of these events are much less important than the reality of the social effects of the events. Such assumptions about what matters and what scholars should study when they study religion are, of course, critical to academic studies of religion. One of the great strengths of this book is the way Pasulka uses religious studies frames to describe and analyze the roles of UFOs and technology in creating contemporary religious and spiritual beliefs and practices. Demonstrating how conventional religious studies methods can be used to interpret the meaning-making work of these phenomena makes concerns about the truth of the claims or the anonymity of the informants less important because it shows how these stories matter, whether they are true or not.

The following seven chapters are case studies, usually focused on one person, a small group of people, or specific events. The first two chapters introduce readers to two of the central informants, Tyler and James, and examine issues related to the artifacts and relics of UFO culture, creation of UFO myths, as well as sacred space issues. Chapter three primarily focuses on Scott, a debunker who is also a believer in UFOs, and it engages in a useful analysis of the real and the not real. Chapter four describes the role of media and fiction in creating UFO beliefs. This is one of the more effective chapters, in which Pasulka describes a media
genre she calls “specialist factual programming” (129), and its role in creating belief among UFO followers. This chapter also examines the role of movies and TV shows in creating an environment infused by the “cultural realities” of UFOs (135). Chapter five is a collection of religious examples, many of them Catholic Virgin Mary apparitions, that Pasulka uses to demonstrate how uncanny events create dichotomies between “official” knowledge and vernacular knowledge. Chapter six examines “the mechanisms of belief, which present UFO events as real events that correspond to the truth” (212).

Chapter seven returns to the informant who began the book, Tyler. Pasulka and Tyler have taken a research trip to Rome, to work in the Vatican Archives and at Castel Gandolfo, the site of the Vatican observatory. Over the course of the trip, Tyler, who has been portrayed as something of a Tony Stark figure—the scientist and inventor who is the hero of several Marvel, action-adventure movies—has several strong, emotional experiences that eventually end in his conversion to Catholicism. The “Conclusion” ends with Pasulka describing a Der Spiegel interview with Martin Heidegger in which the philosopher says that only God can save humanity from our misunderstanding of technology. While Pasulka may want her readers to consider the possibility that traditional religion has something to offer the modern world and its technological meaning-making practices, it is less satisfying as a conclusion to this fascinating, at times puzzling, book. Nevertheless, American Cosmic is well worth the attention of scholars interested in how the religious is both created and functions in the contemporary world.