

How We Down Here View What's Out There

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MCHILMARK, Mass. — any Americans have apparently traded in their old perceptions of the heavens for something new. Gone is the vision of the starry sky as a canopy separating us from paradise. Gone is the counter-image of the aerial regions as a mindless matrix of dead elements, silent forces and intergalactic debris. According to a recent Harris poll, about 60 percent of Americans believe that there is some kind of sensible being out there in space, and the belief is more common among the more highly educated.

An open-minded
American can
believe anything.

The celestial bodies and spaces of our visible universe have always been a cosmic Rorschach test, inviting the human imagination to project meaning into outer space. And until recently, two master narratives have prevailed. One is the religious epic about sunlight as the shadow of God and starlight as the luminous power of heaven shining through holes in the firmament. The other is the equally momentous secular saga about space as an ocean of emptiness, an astrophysical and metaphysical void, offering no hope of celestial glory. These days, many of us have lost confidence in — or have become bored with — both types of tales.

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Closer analysis suggests that educated opinion on the meaning of the blue yonder divides into three camps. There are those who hold the belief — perhaps fueled by all those episodes of “Star Trek” — that amidst all those “billions and billions of stars” is an extraterrestrial smarter than Einstein and more erudite than Aristotle. According to the Harris poll, this is a large and growing group.

Then there are those who emphatically deny the existence of extraterrestrials. As they see it, if you can't find signs of intelligent life on earth, you're not going to find them anywhere else. So they find it easy to dismiss the tales of those who claim to have been abducted by aliens, taken for a ride on a U.F.O. and sent home with a videotape of elflike creatures sipping tea by the control panel.

Perhaps one reason people in this group are so skeptical is that when they were kids, “Invaders From Mars” and “War of the Worlds” gave them nightmares. They find comfort in the idea that there is no one out there beyond our cozy home planet.

Finally, there are those who believe that anything is possible, and so they are willing to be open to the idea of intelligent life in outer space. When the Central Intelligence Agency recently disclosed that more than half of the alleged U.F.O. sightings in the 1950's and 1960's could be attributed to high-altitude spy planes, many people in this camp probably wondered whether a crafty U.F.O. captain, trying to get a peek at our planet, might have been shadowing those U-2's to avoid visual detection from the ground.

The big question is why so many of America's best and brightest have embraced the idea that intelligent extraterrestrial life exists, or at least that it might. One explanation, favored by disenchanted political analysts, is that Americans have become appropriately cynical, believing that if you can't find signs of higher intelligence on earth, you might as well search somewhere else.

A second explanation, favored by conservative critics of higher educa-

tion, is that our venerable religious and scientific master narratives about the heavens have been deconstructed by skeptical and nihilistic champions of postmodernism.

Many American college students do think that to be educated is to be open-minded, and that anything is possible. At least 60 percent of my most literate and sophisticated undergraduates believe that levitation cannot be ruled out. A few of them believe that magi-

cians really do perform levitation and that they call it magic so as not to frighten the general population. So why not extraterrestrials?

A third explanation gives a more positive spin to Americans' open-mindedness about the heavens. According to this view, a long-overdue spiritual revival is taking place in the United States in which the tired and tiresome opposition between faith and science is finally being laid to rest.

Those who see this as an uplifting development may also welcome the boom in books, movies and television shows that take us, as “Star Trek” would have it, “where no man has gone before” — beyond the legends of premodern theology and the disenchanting stories of modern science.

At the moment, all one can say with confidence is that interpretations of the cosmic inkblot are changing. And only God knows what it all means. □