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Counterintuitive yet Unsuccessful. The Spreadability of the Universe People's Religious Ideas

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines religious concepts within the belief system of the Czech new religious movement, the Universe People. Using Minimal Counterintuitiveness (MCI) theory, in the following paper I analyze the first volume of their central text, Talks with Teachings from My Cosmic Friends (1998). Concepts identified within the text were coded using J. L. Barrett's method to calculate their counterintuitiveness scores. The Universe People's syncretic worldview, as presented in the text, draws from New Age and Christianity, and emphasizes an impending ecological threat, the fight against opposing forces, and individual and collective spiritual development. In this paper, I identify five main thematic areas and thirteen main concepts that, on average, scored as minimally counterintuitive. While MCI suggests these concepts should be memorable and successfully transmitted, the decline of the Universe People likely stems from other factors, such as their narrative framework and the broader societal context.

Keywords: new religious movements; cognitive science of religion; minimal counterintuitiveness theory; Universe People; Czechia; UFO religions

1. Introduction

The Universe People, a Czech UFO religion, was prominent in the late nineties. The group was formed in 1998 and appealed to potential converts and the interested public. They attracted media and public attention with lectures and beliefs about benevolent extraterrestrials and impending ecological catastrophe. However, their public activity and visibility lasted for seven years, after which the movement experienced a rapid decline.

This, of course, raises the question of why this happened. The explanations could be many, from the socio-political context, the members' personal lives, the loss of novelty to more available options, and the lack of answers provided or interest of the members. Each of the possibilities

above could be a research goal on its own. In this paper, I approach the question of the group's decline and long-term inability to remain active and relevant from a cognitive perspective. Basing my approach on the idea of minimally counterintuitive ideas, I aimed to determine which concepts within the first volume of the Universe People's texts had the potential to be successfully remembered, retained and transmitted. The subsequent explanation could only be partial and disregards a wide range of other social, biological, and spiritual phenomena.

The paper uses research on the minimal counterintuitiveness of ideas, dealing with the memorability and attractiveness of concepts that violate intuitive ontological categories, in order to examine concepts introduced by the Universe People to their audience. The goal was to determine which religious concepts and ideas had the potential to increase or decrease the memorability of the Universe People's belief system and the chances of it spreading within society. I used the first volume of the Universe People's central text,[1] published at the beginning of their public activity when its ideas were first introduced in book form. I analyzed the text primarily according to the works of Pascal Boyer, Dan Sperber, and Justin L. Barrett. I modified Barrett's methodology[2] to quantify the minimal counterintuitiveness score of individual concepts identified within it.

2. The Universe People movement

UFO religions, or UFO cults, revolve around belief in extraterrestrial beings[3] and the possibility of communicating with them, interpreting

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1 Ivo A. Benda, *Talks with Teachings from My Cosmic Friends* (1998).

2 Justin L. Barrett, "Coding and Quantifying Counterintuitiveness in Religious Concepts: Theoretical and Methodological Reflections," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 20 (2008): 308–338, https://doi.org/10.1163/157006808X371806.

3 The extraterrestrials themselves are seen as highly benevolent, scientifically, technically, morally, and spiritually advanced. New Age views them as interested in humanity, watching over them, and wanting to help them progress into an ideal, utopian society, overcome social problems and issues, and help prevent the destruction of the Earth. Contrasting these benevolent and highly evolved beings, there can be counterparts in the form of less evolved, hostile, selfish, or corrupted aliens. These negative beings attempt to sabotage or at least slow down humanity's progress toward the ideal state and prevent them from reaching the point of spiritual revolution. For Universe People, this position is occupied by the Forces of Darkness who have fallen away from the Creator. A common way of extraterrestrial-human contact is communication through channeling, a practice derived from spiritism, enabling chosen individuals to reach beings on another plane of existence. Jennifer E. Porter, "Extraterrestrials," in *Encyclopedia of New Religious Movements*, ed. Peter B. Clarke (Routledge, 2006), 199–200; Mikael Rothstein, "UFOs," in *Encyclopedia of New Religious Movements*, ed. Peter B. Clarke (Routledge, 2006); Scott R. Scribner, "Alien Abduction Narratives and Religious Contexts," in *Alien Worlds*: *Social and Religious Dimensions of*

member's alleged experiences with UFOs or aliens through a spiritual lens. The contact that allows some people to receive information from higher, spiritual beings makes them unique, chosen to uncover transcendent knowledge beneficial for humanity or at least for the group. They can be contactees, chosen individuals who are contacted by an extraterrestrial being to receive critical information.[4]

One such group that exemplifies these characteristics is the Universe People. This movement started forming in 1997 when Miloslava Drsková, a self-proclaimed contactee, met Ivo Benda. Drsková claimed to have communicated with extraterrestrials since 1995 and helped Benda establish his first contact in 1997. The earliest messages attributed to Drsková as a contactee come from the end of 1994.[5] Ivo Benda, who claimed to be in contact with several extraterrestrial beings, lectured on the knowledge his cosmic friends allegedly passed on to him. After establishing extraterrestrial contact, Benda took the initiative and assumed leadership, started the still-active website,[6] and gradually formed a group around himself and Drsková.[7] Together, with contributions from other contactees, they completed and published 10 volumes of *Talks with Teachings from My Cosmic Friends*,[8] with the first volume published in 1998 and the final volume in 2006. These texts are not considered sacred, but informational texts that convey messages from cooperating extraterrestrial beings, not from sacred and worshipped entities.

Emerging new religious movements (NRMs)[9] are influenced by the country of origin and its historical-political-social environment. The peak of the Universe People movement occurred between 1998 and 2005. The Universe People made many attempts to reach out to the broader public and political representatives,[10] in sync with the tendency of NRMs to have

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Extraterrestrial Contact, ed. Diana G. Tumminia (Syracuse University Press, 2007), 141; Partridge, "UFO Religions," 214.

4 Preston C. Copeland, *Saucers and the Sacred: The Folklore of UFO Narratives* (All Graduate Plan B and other Reports, 2012), 13.

5 Benda, *Talks with Teachings from My Cosmic Friends*, 12, 26, 27, 29, 33, 58-59.

6 Vesmírní lidé, accessed December 14, 2025, http://vesmirni-lide.cz/.

7 Money for funding of the groups meetings, materials and website came from voluntary donations (still open today) and Benda's personal finances.

8 Benda, *Talks with Teachings from My Cosmic Friends*.

9 A new religious movement consists of first-generation believers, typically new converts actively establishing the group without prior legacy and centered around a leader. This often fosters strong group cohesion and heightened enthusiasm. The worldview of NRMs is often dichotomous, sharply distinguishing between good and evil as the movement interprets the world in varying degrees of religiosity.

10 See for example transcript of a fax message sent to the Prague Castle asking president V. Havel for a meeting; Benda, *Talks with Teachings from My Cosmic Friends*, 235-236.

more enthusiastic, sometimes even borderline fanatical members who see attempts at converting others as their calling[11] to spread the one true teaching. Since the existence of extraterrestrials was not proven in any other way than through self-reported telepathic contacts, members slowly lost interest with no facts to support such enthusiastic belief. The repeated failure of the prophecy also played a role, with no physical extraterrestrials or spaceships revealing themselves to the public, causing a drop in activity and, in the long term, a drop in less devoted members. In 2005, Benda withdrew from the public eye and moved to Slovakia, self-publishing *Talks*' tenth and final volume in 2006.

The Universe People was never an official organization but rather a group of enthusiasts, listeners, and individual believers drawn to the person of Ivo Benda and the possibility of self-expression and self-actualization through extraterrestrial contact. In Stark and Bainbridge's typology, the Universe People could be classified as an audience cult, a diffuse and loosely organized group. "Sometimes some members of this audience actually may gather to hear a lecture. But there are virtually no aspects of formal organization to these activities, and membership remains at most a consumer activity."[12] The compensators such a group provides are of low value – consequently, low cost[13] – but the social aspect is significant, providing opportunities for attendees to share experiences, exchange opinions, and build relationships while circulating materials and ideas among themselves.

The Universe People's belief system is syncretic, combining theosophy, ufology, unorthodox Christianity, and the New Age. The eschatology of the Universe People movement is not apocalyptic. Still, it does contain warnings of an ecological catastrophe resulting from human selfishness, the exploitation of nature's resources, and the negativity and low vibrations keeping people hostile and ignorant.

The Universe People believe in the existence of benevolent extraterrestrials, particularly from the Pleiades, such as Ashtar[14] and Ptaah, who reside aboard a spaceship in Earth's orbit and watch over humanity.

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11 Barker, "What are We Studying?"; Barker, "Even New Religious Movements," 66.
12 Rodney Stark and William S. Bainbridge, "Of Churches, Sects, and Cults: Preliminary Concepts for a Theory of Religious Movements," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 18, no. 2 (1979): 126, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108674256.007.
13 Stark and Bainbridge, "Of Churches, Sects, and Cults," 126.
14 Ashtar (sometimes Ashtar Sheran) is a supposed extraterrestrial being, who allegedly first contacted George Van Tassell in 1952. Since then, many contactees have claimed to have communicated with Ashtar and received messages about advanced civilizations on other planets and warnings concerning the impending destruction of Earth. Christopher Helland, "From Extraterrestrials to Ultraterrestrials: The Evolution of the Concept of Ashtar," in *UFO Religions*, ed. Christopher Partridge (Routledge, 2003).

Humanity is believed to be under the control of the Forces of Darkness, who control them through media, politics, church institutions, and technology. Their power can be broken by avoiding these influences, by positive social change, and by spiritual evolution. If the positive change doesn't happen in time, evacuation spaceships are prepared to transport sufficiently spiritually evolved people to another suitable planet. Then, after the earth has healed, they can be transported back and witness the Second Coming of Christ. Ultimately, good is destined to win.

Group membership doesn't require adherence to any particular religious doctrine. Communication with cosmic friends is believed to be possible by raising one's vibrations, which grants all members an equal chance to achieve the status of the chosen one. Members are encouraged to avoid negative influences, cultivate accurate and positive energy, and refine their energy from coarse to fine through personal effort and self-development. At the same time, this contributes to the betterment of society, alleviates the burden on Earth, and ultimately defeats the Forces of Darkness, resulting in union with the Creator.

3. Minimal Counterintuitiveness Theory

NRMs' Interpretation systems often present several concepts and ideas that may seem unfamiliar to the general public. Such unusualness, however, is not exclusive to religious interpretations of the world. Humans possess innate intuitive expectations that shape our understanding of our surroundings. These expectations can be challenged to a degree while still being able to be successfully cognitively processed. Cognitive science deals with these counterintuitive concepts and their importance in spreading religious teachings.[15]

The Minimally Counterintuitive Ideas (MCI) theory aims to explain the retention and spread of religious concepts. It is based on Dan Sperber's epidemiology of representations[16] and intuitive ontology, dealing with classifying concepts on the basis of their qualitative properties.[17]

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15 Boyer states that cognitive theory doesn't explain the macrophenomena of religious transmission but is suitable for studying the sets of representations which comprise the religious ideas of individuals in a given cultural environment. Pascal Boyer, "Explaining Religious Ideas: Elements of a Cognitive Approach," *Numen* 39, no. 1 (1992): 28, 29, Semantic Scholar, https://doi.org/10.1163/156852792X00159.

16 Dan Sperber, *Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic Approach* (Blackwell, 1996).

17 Pascal Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: A Cognitive Theory of Religion* (University of California Press, 1994).

Sperber states that "[c]ultural phenomena are ecological patterns of psychological phenomena"[18] and that their spread follows patterns set by human cognitive predispositions and mechanisms. The presence, prevalence, and stability of religious ideas in a given cultural environment and context depend on their ability to utilize the existing human cognitive systems in a way comparable to that of viruses or infectious diseases.[19] An external, public representation – in this case, a religious idea – is processed by the individual as a perception, on the basis of which the individual creates his mental representation, which he keeps in his mind, forgets or modifies, and converts into action for communication to another individual or group of individuals.[20] This process follows a causal sequence and leads to the varying success of maintaining and spreading different concepts, including religious ideas.

Intuitive ontologies are formed during early childhood, forming strong sets of theoretical assumptions that subsequently guide conceptual development. Empirical knowledge builds on these quasi-theoretical intuitive principles. Although empirical knowledge can overwrite the intuitive effect, it remains present as naive knowledge, completed and overwritten by learned skills and knowledge, which can be considered parasitic upon preexisting mental systems and capacities.[21] "The ontological repertoire is the set of assumptions people entertain about the existence of non-observable entities,"[22] consisting of basic expectations about what things exist in the world. A representation always includes the general assumptions of features typical for a member of a category and the assumption of a feature shared by all members of that category.[23]

Purzycki and Willard summarise the key points of MCI theory as follows:

1) Our evolved minds consist partly of innate inferential systems (i.e., knowledge that exists without explicit learning, conscious reasoning, or reflection), and these systems provide a wide range of inferential knowledge that we have about our world.

2) Concepts and stories with content that minimally violate these inferences are easier to remember than ideas and narratives that are (i) entirely consistent with this inferential knowledge, or (ii) violate too many inferences (hence, "minimally counterintuitive").

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18 Dan Sperber, "Anthropology and Psychology: Towards an Epidemiology of Representations," *Man* 20, no. 1 (1985): 76, https://doi.org/10.2307/2802222.

19 Sperber, "Anthropology and Psychology," 74.

20 Sperber, "Anthropology and Psychology," 77.

21 Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas*, 138; Boyer, "Explaining Religious Ideas," 43, 45; Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (Basic Books, 2001), 311.

22 Boyer, "Explaining Religious Ideas," 39.

23 Boyer, "Explaining Religious Ideas," 46.

3) Ideas central to religious traditions primarily consist of minimally counterintuitive concepts.
4) The cultural ubiquity of religious concepts can be explained in part by virtue of their relatively higher retention rates.[24]

Not all concepts have the same potential for cultural transfer. Those that are easy to recognize are more likely to become part of cognitive repertoires, to be processed, and, as a result, to be communicated, transmitted, and spread.[25] Minimally counterintuitive concepts appear to be cognitively optimal.[26] By violating one or two intuitive expectations,[27] the remaining intuitive inferential expectations for such a concept are preserved. They achieve their cognitive optimum – the ideal form of the representation in which the element in question is comfortably remembered and easily transmitted – by being unnatural and noticeable yet straightforward enough to be represented, processed, coded, retained, and recalled.

4. Minimal Counterintuitiveness of Concepts

According to how they activate a particular set of expectations,[28] concepts and mental representations of concepts are classified into one of the widely occurring universal ontological categories.[29] This categorization enables successful cognitive processing. If one of the expectations in the set is violated, the assumption is that the rest of the set still applies. In the case that one expectation is transferred from another set of expectations, the transfer of the rest of the set can be presumed.[30]

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24 Benjamin G. Purzycki and Aiyana K. Willard, "MCI Theory: A Critical Discussion," *Religion, Brain and Behavior* 6, no. 3 (2015): 207, https://doi.org/10.1080/215359 9X.2015.1024915.

25 Boyer, "Explaining Religious Ideas," 50-51.

26 Konika Banerjee, Omar S. Haque, and Elizabeth S. Spelke, "Melting Lizards and Crying Mailboxes: Children's Preferential Recall of Minimally Counterintuitive Concepts," *Cognitive Science* 37, no. 7 (2013): 1251, https://doi.org/10.1111/cogs.12037; Lauren Gonce et al., "Imagery Effects on Recall of Minimally Counterintuitive Concepts", *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 7, no. 3-4 (2007): 355–367: 357.

27 Gonce et al., "Imagery Effects on Recall," 357.

28 Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 315.

29 Barrett, "Coding and Quantifying Counterintuitiveness;" Boyer, *Religion Explained*.

30 Take, for example, a mudskipper. This fish walks on land, a feature not expected from a fish, but its other features fit the category. A person previously unfamiliar with mudskippers would rightfully expect them to survive in water, swim, feed, produce waste, procreate with others of it's kind and lay eggs and to avoid predators. On the other hand, a fish that lives fully in water, looks and behaves as a typical fish but is able to speak would be expected to have more abilities commonly associated with a person. The ability to speak is accompanied with language capabilities, understanding the language spoken, independent and abstract thinking and these features are thus expected to co-occur. Justin Barrett, Emily Burdett, and Tenelle Porter, "Counterintuitiveness in Folktales: Finding the Cognitive Optimum," *Journal of*

To describe concepts that violate some ontological expectations, Boyer introduced the term minimally counterintuitive ideas (MCI). The number of violations that make an idea an MCI was specified by Barret's counterintuitiveness quantification.[31] An intuitive (INT) idea violates zero ontological expectations, and a minimally counterintuitive (MCI) one violates one or two. The level of maximal counterintuitiveness (MXCI) is met with three or more violations.

Through breaches and transfers, these concepts violate the ontological assumptions expected from their fundamental ontological category, making them more engaging and increasing their chances of being remembered, retained, and transmitted. Not all concepts, whether intuitive, MCI, or MXCI, have the same chances. Some ideas can be considered culturally universal and, therefore, universally more memorable and counterintuitive across cultures, increasing the likelihood of being spread.[32]

Context plays an important role,[33] providing a framework for understanding religious concepts and for increasing their successful spread. Boyer's version of the MCI theory only considers culturally universal concepts and ideas and does not control for the culture inside which they are being spread. Building on Boyer's content-based approach, Upal addresses the importance of context in explaining religion through a context-based approach.[34] In studying religious concepts and ideas, content (in this case, counterintuitiveness) and contextual factors, including narrative frames and individual knowledge and motivation, should come into play. "Both approaches also assume that better recall for minimally counterintuitive concepts is a result of evolutionary processes that result in people having a memory architecture that causes minimally counterintuitive concepts to be better remembered than other types of concepts."[35]

5. Criticism of the MCI Theory

Cognition and Culture 9 (2009): 271-287, https://doi.org/10.1163/1567709 09X12489459066345; Barrett, "Coding and Quantifying Counterintuitiveness," 322, 324.

31 Barrett, "Coding and Quantifying Counterintuitiveness."

32 M. Afzal Upal, "An Alternative Account of the Minimal Counterintuitiveness Effect," *Cognitive Systems Research* 11, no. 2 (2010): 199, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cogsys.2009.08.003.

33 Upal, "An Alternative Account," 199; Pascal Boyer, ed., *Cognitive Aspects of Religious Symbolism* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 36-37; Sperber, "Anthropology and Psychology."

34 Upal, "An Alternative Account," 194-203.

35 Upal, "An Alternative Account," 195.

This paper utilizes MCI theory as a framework to partially explain the Universe People's religious ideas, but the theory's shortcomings need to be addressed. While suitable for this specific purpose, MCI theory presents several challenges due to its uncritically accepted assumptions and ambiguous research. As a stand-alone theory, it has weaknesses and would benefit from being connected with other theories and, ideally, other disciplines.[36]

The most consistent criticism comes from Willard and Purzycki.[37] Firstly, the theory relies on uncritically accepted assumptions about innate inferential systems and the inherent counterintuitiveness of religious ideas. While there is evidence supporting the evolution of the mind and inferential knowledge, the counterintuitiveness of religious ideas remains a research subject and has not been systematically proven in large-scale empirical studies. Additionally, there is no clear answer as to why MCI concepts only make up a small proportion of religious stories, especially when their higher memorability is demonstrable.[38] However, MCI concepts fall within Boyer's cognitive optimum and are the core of many narratives and stories, including religious ones.

In the case of a narrative filled with MCI concepts, the sheer number of them would be very challenging to think about, and the appeal of MCI elements would decrease, increasing the counterintuitiveness of the narrative as a whole. Such a thing can be seen in the analyzed text, where the high frequency of appearances of cognitively optimal MCI concepts makes for a cognitively loaded story that is potentially difficult to process.

Another issue lies in the unclear distinction between counterintuitiveness and counter-schematics and the difficulty of operationalizing them. Barrett acknowledges the problematic areas pointed out by Willard and Purzycki but views them as issues within the current state of research rather than problems with the MCI theory itself.[39]

> Failure of researchers to properly operationalize counterintuitiveness and, for instance, sometimes confuse it with counter-schematicity does not entail that the two are the same, or that counterintuitiveness cannot be operationalized reasonably well. That there are some concepts that we simply do not know yet whether they are properly categorized as MCI versus counter-schematic likewise does not count against the theory.[40]

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36 Barrett, "Coding and Quantifying Counterintuitiveness," 313.
37 Purzycki and Willard, "MCI Theory."
38 Scott Atran and Ara Norenzayan, "Religion's Evolutionary Landscape: Counterintuition, Commitment, Compassion, Communion," *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 27, no. 6 (2022): 722, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0140525x04000172.
39 Justin L. Barrett, "The (Modest) Utility of MCI Theory," *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 6 (2015): 43-44, https://doi.org/10.1080/2153599X.2015.1015049.
40 Barrett, "The (Modest) Utility of MCI Theory," 44.

Nevertheless, these issues can play into the results of empirical research and lead to differences between studies.[41]

To address this issue, Purzycki and Willard present two kinds of inferences associated with the dual processing model – deep and shallow inferences. Deep inferences stem from intuitive knowledge, which is innate, evolutionarily implanted, and develops in the early stages of childhood development It is implicit, reached quickly and automatically, and remains unchanged across individuals. Shallow inferences, on the other hand, stem from schematicity, which is gained through learning and is socially and culturally influenced. This knowledge is culturally specific, fluid, and can change throughout a person's life.

Given the nature of the *Talks*,[42] a clear demarcation between counterintuitive and counter-schematic can be tricky to establish, especially when describing intentional agents. MCI theory does not involve the explanation of motivations for religious belief and devotion; it focuses on the content of concepts about the cognitive structures of the human mind. The *Mickey Mouse Problem*[43] addresses the contextual factors of belief in given ideas and concepts, suggesting that characters displaying counterintuitive properties are not necessarily those people choose to believe in.

Related to this is the *Zeus Problem*,[44] which questions why people do not believe in historical gods or gods of other cultures. The answer here is their topicality and concrete impact on the observable world of the believer. Similarly, in the so-called *Santa Claus problem*,[45] the factor influencing (non)belief is the context of the environment, not the idea/concept itself.

According to Barrett, building upon Boyer's hypothesis of access to strategic information, a successful mental representation of a god[46] should exhibit certain traits: being counterintuitive: an intentional agent, possessing strategic information, being able to act in detectable ways, and being capable of motivating behaviors that reinforce belief.[47] Therefore, the suc-

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41 Barrett, "Coding and Quantifying Counterintuitiveness," 309.

42 Benda, *Talks with Teachings from My Cosmic Friends*.

43 Scott Atran, "Folk Biology and the Anthropology of Science: Cognitive Universals and Cultural Particulars (+Open Peer Commentary and Author's Response)," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 21, no. 4 (1998): 602.

44 Will Gervais and Joseph Henrich, "The Zeus Problem: Why Representational Content Biases Cannot Explain Faith in Gods," *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 10 (2010): 383-389.

45 Justin L. Barrett, "Why Santa Claus Is Not a God," *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 8 (2008): 149-161.

46 In the case of the Universe People's belief system, this is not limited to God or gods, but rather supernatural or superhuman agents as a whole.

47 Barrett, "Why Santa Claus," 150.

cessful spread of concepts meeting the listed criteria can be explained cognitivelywithout the need for further research into the context.

In addition to these traits, the potential figure of faith must be relevant to its believers. The *Zeus Problem* addresses this, explaining why people might believe, for example, in the Abrahamic God but not in the gods of the Greek pantheon, even if both possess the five key traits of mental representations of a god. The answer lies in the cultural and social context, which invokes a sense of commitment and motivates religious behavior and respect, differentiating fictional characters and other god-like concepts[48] from revered and believed-in gods.

MCI concepts violate intuitive expectations or deep inferences. The shared understanding makes them universally attractive throughout the population.[49] The gained, shallow inferences are a product of schemas, consisting of semantic associations and ontogenic. Upal addresses the importance of context in attempts to explain religion using a context-based approach.[50] In the study of religious concepts and ideas, both content (in this case, counterintuitiveness) and contextual factors, including narrative frames and individual knowledge and motivation play a role.[51] The theory and method based on it are concerned with deep inferences and cannot deal with the contextual placement of concepts within the text. To work with this, it is necessary to consider both intuitive expectations and the context in which concepts and ideas are placed. The concept's relevance for potential believers is primarily influenced by social learning, and narrative, social, and cultural context, not only memorability and transfer potential.

I see religious ideas and concepts as specific cultural representations whose cognitive optimum lies between intuitive and maximally counterintuitive ideas. They are characterized by a small degree of counterintuitiveness but retain other expected properties, heightening their chance of being successfully spread.

6. Methodology

The research goal was to determine which religious ideas and concepts within the analyzed text have the potential to increase or decrease the memorability and attractiveness of the group's belief system with respect

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48 Santa Claus is a fitting example, perceived as more human than supernatural, with only partial access to strategic information and limited ability to act in the world. Barrett, "Why Santa Claus."
49 Barrett, "Coding and Quantifying Counterintuitiveness," 311.
50 Upal, "An Alternative Account."
51 Upal, "An Alternative Account."

to potential converts. To establish this, it was necessary to determine the extent to which they are counterintuitive or disruptive to their basic ontological categories. Attractiveness-increasing concepts are the ones that achieve a cognitive optimum, are easily remembered, and thus are transmitted and spread. At the start of my research, I expected there to be a significant breach of the ontological categories of the concepts found. If this proved to be the case, the concepts would be closer to maximal counterintuitiveness and thus have a low chance of being remembered and spread.

The methodology draws from the article by Barrett,[52] in which he introduces a coding model based on the number of transfers and breaches between ontological categories of concepts. Barrett's counterintuitiveness coding has been tested on cultural materials by Burdett, Porter, and Barrett.[53] Their research applies the Simplicity Rule to all steps of the methodology. "This rule, underpinned by evidence that human cognitive systems generally strive for representational and computational efficiency and simplicity, states that when coding concepts, assume the simplest (i.e., least counterintuitive) conceptual representation that captures the object's properties."[54] It has to be prefaced that Barrett's coding scheme is context-agnostic, lacking specific mechanisms for addressing cultural or textual context. For my research, I account for this by considering counterintuitiveness to be a violation of both deep and shallow expectations.[55] Furthermore, despite proper method adaptation and the active pursuit of objectivity, the coding process inevitably involves a degree of subjective interpretation. Nevertheless, memorability is still a key factor in spreading the studied concepts.

The data for analysis came from the publicly available text of *Talks with Teachings from My Cosmic Friends*[56], published on the Universe People website. I proceeded in steps similar to those in the research of Barrett and Burdett, Porter, and Barrett, which I modified and simplified for my purposes.

Firstly, I reduced Barrett's six steps[57] to five. I replaced the first step, which initially called for eliminating essential categories, with a thematic classification of the text unit. This allowed for strongly similar ideas to be

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52 Barrett, "Coding and Quantifying Counterintuitiveness."
53 Barrett, Burdett, and Porter, "Counterintuitiveness in Folktales."
54 Barrett, Burdett, and Porter, "Counterintuitiveness in Folktales," 280.
55 Purzycki and Willard, "MCI Theory," 6-7, 10-13.
56 In the analysis, I only worked with the first issue of *Talks with Teachings from My Cosmic Friends*.
57 Barrett, "Coding and Quantifying Counterintuitiveness."

associated in a unified concept.[58] This association made it possible to reduce the number of fragmented ideas and to better define the central concepts.

Secondly, I omitted the identification of breaches within breaches and transfers within transfers, as the paramount importance lies in the primary ontological category of the concepts in question and the number of simple transfers and breaches within it.

Thirdly, the transfers and breaches were signified by a capital letter in both the prefix and suffix of the word.

My steps were as follows:

Step 1: **Identify the thematic area.** I categorized the analyzed text sections into these five thematic areas: a) Society (description of the ideal society, instructions for its improvement, appeal for the development and improvement of humanity), b) Technology (descriptions of technology, instructions for its use, its ecological impacts), c) Biology (biological descriptions, nature and lifeforms), d) Spirituality (status of a chosen one, love, appeal for individual and collective spiritual development, messages regarding spiritual beings, changes in vibrational levels, messages of a religious nature), and e) Imminent Threat (messages regarding threats to humanity, impending ecological or other disasters, societal decline).

Step 2: **Identify the ontological categories.** In the same way as in the cited studies, I defined the ontological categories of concepts as spatial entities, solid objects, living things, animates, and persons,[59] developed out of the expectation sets of spatiality, physicality, biology, animacy, and mentality. The intuitive ontological categories are characterized and conditioned by various combinations of activated sets of intuitive expectations.[60]

Step 3: **Identify the transfers within the ontological category.** If the concept was attributed properties from a different set of expectations to the set identified in Step 2, the transfer was marked by a capital

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58 In such a way, f.e. fax machine, screen, and automatic equipment were included in a larger concept of technology given their similar attributes.

59 Barrett, "Coding and Quantifying Counterintuitiveness;" Barrett, Burdett, and Porter, "Counterintuitiveness in Folktales."

60 Spatial entities are conditioned by spatiality; solid objects by spatiality and physicality; living things by spatiality, physicality, and animacy; animates by spatiality, physicality, biology, and animacy; and persons by spatiality, physicality, biology, animacy, and mentality. Barrett, "Coding and Quantifying Counterintuitiveness," 317, 322.

letter in the prefix. Unless the text specified the transfer of only one property, I assumed the transfer of the complete set.[61]

Step 4: **Identify the breaches within the ontological category.** If the text stated that the concept in question doesn't possess all of the properties associated with the applicable ontological category, I marked the breach by a capital letter in the word's suffix. Unless specified otherwise, I assumed the violation of only one of the properties, the rest retained.[62] In the case of multiple breaches, I revised the category and went back to Step 2 to adhere to the Simplicity Rule.

Step 5: **Quantify the counterintuitiveness.** By summing the symbolic letters in the prefixes and suffixes of the concepts, I calculated the counterintuitiveness score of the concepts identified. As in Barrett's work, each letter added one point to the overall counterintuitiveness score, and the points did not subtract from each other.[63] I considered a concept with a score of 1-2 to be minimally counterintuitive (MCI). An intuitive (INT) concept scored 0, and a maximally counterintuitive (MXCI) concept scored 3-4. Following the Simplicity Rule, if the score was higher, I revised the category in which the given concept was initially classified. Since the most straightforward conceptual representation is preferred, such a concept "will be unlikely to possess online inferential potential and will be discarded in favor of a simpler form."[64]

On the basis of the coding analysis, I answered the question of which elements of the *Talks* decrease or increase the attractiveness of the Universe People's teaching to believers and potential converts. I considered the elements increasing attractiveness to violate both the ontological category and cultural expectations. The elements decreasing attractiveness would be concepts and ideas that were too disruptive of their category and, therefore, too complicated to remember or downright nonsensical. For my research, I considered counterintuitiveness to be a violation of both deep and shallow expectations.[65]

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61 Barrett, Burdett, and Porter, "Counterintuitiveness in Folktales;" Barrett, "Coding and Quantifying Counterintuitiveness," 322.

62 Barrett, Burdett, and Porter, "Counterintuitiveness in Folktales;" Barrett, "Coding and Quantifying Counterintuitiveness," 324.

63 Barrett, "Coding and Quantifying Counterintuitiveness," 325.

64 Barrett, "Coding and Quantifying Counterintuitiveness," 331.

65 Purzycki and Willard, "MCI Theory," 6-7, 10-13.

7. Talks with Teachings from My Cosmic Friends

I analyzed the contents of the first volume of *Talks*, published in 1998, collected by Ivo Benda and Miloslava[66] Drsková in collaboration with other contactees in the Universe People group. The series of *Talks* comprises a final number of 10 volumes and 2,828 messages. The central texts of Talks, Benda's lectures and video recordings along with images, videos, lectures, and publications which serve as inspiration are publicly available on the Universe People website.[67]

I chose this volume because it is the first text in the series, compiled, shared, and published during the group's initial formation, when interest was very high. The concepts and ideas included are new and presented in a comprehensive written form for the first time. Aside from being self-published in two editions, the *Talks* spread in both electronic and home-printed forms – a printable version is available on the Universe People website – with the help of group members. Current and potential group members were encouraged to read the book, print it out, and give it to others they felt could benefit from its teachings. Ongoing statistics of downloads and readings are a notable part of the *Talks* as well.[68]

In the last section of *Talks*, there is a part composed of conversations with the Creator channeled by the Olomouc Group of Peace.[69] These are 56 answers to questions from members on topics such as specific people, advice, past lives, and events. The messages are mainly personal statements attributed to six contactees communicating with the Creator and the Earth through extraterrestrial intermediaries. The section is fragmented into many questions and answers, some very brief, and the transition between topics is not indicated. Since these sections are mainly personal statements addressed to a small group of contactees rather than messages from cosmic friends, I have analyzed this part as one singular text section.

The first volume contains 378 messages transmitted to humanity by benevolent extraterrestrials through chosen contactees. Drsková supposedly received the first message at the end of 1994; the newest ones within the volume are from 1998. Counting unnumbered parts such as the introduction, letters, and texts that do not fall into the category of messages,

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66 In the *Talks* the diminutive "Miluška" is used instead.

67 Vesmírní lidé.

68 F.e. Benda, Talks with Teachings from My Cosmic Friends, 15, 127, 139, 146, 165, 175, 185, 204, 215.

69 Benda, *Talks with Teachings from My Cosmic Friends*, 12, 26, 27, 29, 33, 58-59, 267-269, 305-322. The full wording is not included in the English translation available online.

I analyzed a total of 390 text sections, with three longer, complex messages separated into more thematic units.

8. Results

The text sections analyzed can be defined as either informative or personal. The informative messages are more formal, containing mainly "factual" information related to life on Earth and other planets, the position of the spaceships, extraterrestrial technology, and the current state of affairs. The main contactee conveying these pieces of information was Benda, with a total of 134 messages. Among other things, dozens of these messages are dedicated to information about the number of earthly and cosmic persons reading the texts of the *Talks*.

Personal messages consist mainly of answers to individual questions and regard personal relationships. They are addressed to a particular contactee and are familiar and intimate. Many of these were attributed to Drsková (who received the highest number of messages – 137) and to new contactees and new group members.

Of the 390 analyzed text sections, 225 were informative, 129 were personal, 35 were mixed, and one was impossible to place. I considered the messages of the Olomouc Group of Peace to be one text section of mixed nature.

Given the belief system of the Universe People, I sorted the text sections in *Talks* into five thematic areas according to the central theme (see Tab. 1). I slightly generalized the concepts identified to construct 16 comprehensible concepts, as presented in the Results section. Sixty-one analyzed text sections did not contain any distinguishable concept.

Theme	Number of concepts
society	164
spirituality	210
biology	67
technology	52
imminent threat	72

Tab. 1: The number of concept-containing text sections
per thematic area

8.1. Thematic Areas and Concepts

8.1.1. Society

The thematic area of Society includes the concepts of extraterrestrial beings, Cosmic People, and cosmic friends. The connecting links between these concepts are relationships and references to the social order of the subjects mentioned.

I use **extraterrestrial beings** to represent intelligent beings inhabiting the Universe and subject to the Creator. These beings could also be labeled Forces of Light. They are described as benevolent, wise, and spiritually evolved extraterrestrials of many possible forms or as spiritual beings. This category includes more abstract beings such as angels (appearing twice) and Ashtar Sheran. Ashtar Sheran should be included in the category of cosmic friends since he is a contacting being and in direct contact with humanity; however, his descriptions significantly vary from those of cosmic friends. In the *Talks*, extraterrestrial beings are characterized as gifted with absolute consciousness, the ability of telepathy, and superhuman wisdom. Some are described as having no digestive system or no material form.[70] The predominant category of extraterrestrial beings was person, breaching physicality or biology, and person-PB.

Cosmic People are beings similar to humans, living in a highly developed society on various planets and galaxies. There is an implication that these would be biological, physical, and wholly material humans. At the same time, their semi-materiality and absence of corporeal form are also implied. Unlike extraterrestrial beings, cosmic people are more specific and form a human-like society. They are exceptionally wise, highly socially and spiritually developed, wrapped in a force field, capable of telepathic communication, and able to send love and light to other beings. They can temporarily exist outside their bodies and live in the space-time dimensions of the spiritual worlds. The most frequent description of Cosmic People is a person (61 appearances out of 102) and a person-B. The average MCI score of Cosmic People comes up to 1.49.

Cosmic friends come from amongst Cosmic People. These would be extraterrestrials establishing contacts and forming relationships with people on Earth. They are concerned about the Earth's future and strive to help people, the Earth, and the divine creation. The majority of the text sections talk about them as if they were regular persons (49 appearances out of 144 turned out to be in the INT person category). Breaches occurred in the expectations of biology, physicality, or both, making the MCI score

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70 Benda, *Talks with Teachings from My Cosmic Friends*, 19-20, 225-226.

1.32. Cosmic friends are given human features and traits and also the ability to telepathically communicate and connect to the contactees, respond to their thought signals, and be very wise and long-lived. They breach physicality by being able to manipulate energy, send vibrations and streams of love, and be ever-present and possibly invisible. They can touch or caress the contactee and lead their hand, sit beside them unseen and unnoticed,[71] telepathically communicate, and form close relationships with "their" contactees, taking an interest in their personal lives.

8.1.2. Spirituality

In the thematic area of Spirituality, I have defined the concepts of the Creator, Jesus Christ, contactees, and evolved persons.

The concept of **the Creator** appeared on 123 occasions. Still, despite the Creator being given a meaningful role within the belief system, only 111 mentions provided closer information, enabling me to unambiguously code him as either a person or a spatial entity. The most common category into which the concept of the Creator fell was M-spatial entity (68 appearances) and person (26 appearances).

The average MCI score came up to 0.84, with the minimum being zero and the maximum 3, making the concept minimally counterintuitive on average. The Universe People's idea of the Creator was similar to Barrett's concept of God,[72] a spatial entity transferring mentality, thus violating one intuitive expectation. In the *Talks*, the attributed properties were fatherhood, the ability to touch and interact with the material and immaterial world, omnipresence, omniscience, love, and being eternal. The Creator is the giver of laws; the executor of punishments; the creator of the universe, the Earth, people, love, and light; and the guarantor of the course of the universe and the world. After death, everything returns to him, and the dead become part of him.

The concept of **Jesus Christ** is explicitly Christian, described as the son of God, visible to everyone, a multidimensional being ready to descend to the cleaned-out Earth in corporeal form. He is the guarantor of human progress and the commander in the plan for the salvation of humanity,[73] and the embodiment of both the Creator and the spiritual guarantor of the galaxy.[74] The essential category is a person, either intuitive or violating the expectation of biology, physicality, or both.

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71 This motif appears mainly in the messages of the Olomouc Group of Peace.
72 Barrett, "Coding and Quantifying Counterintuitiveness," 328.
73 Benda, *Talks with Teachings from My Cosmic Friends*, 153-154.
74 Benda, *Talks with Teachings from My Cosmic Friends*, 210-211.

The thematic area of Spirituality includes the concepts of the contactees and the evolved persons. They share a common ontological category and similar properties but can be distinguished as two different concepts. When the *Talks* were written, the **contactees** were living people who could establish telepathic connections with extraterrestrial beings and receive messages from them through channeling. These would be persons potentially breaching the expectations of biology, physicality, or both. Their descriptions in the text were quite detailed and information-dense.

The most significant number of violations occurred in biology, with contactees categorized as person-B in 29 cases out of 48. The expectation of biology is violated by telepathic abilities, physical changes within their bodies, different DNA helices, the ability to see and feel Cosmic People and cosmic friends, and the production of energy inside their bodies. The expectation of physicality is violated by their ability to manipulate energy, share and send it out, change their vibrational and spiritual levels, and possess a smooth-vibrational body that can be interfered with using special techniques.

I did not assume contactees to be capable of extraterrestrial communication or telepathy. When the ability to establish extraterrestrial contact was not explicitly mentioned in the texts, I coded the contactee as a person with no breach or transfer. Although the implication could reasonably be expected, my goal was to base my findings solely on the text available, with no personal assumptions. The number of biology and physicality breaches averaged around 2, but the description of contactees as INT persons moved the average to 1.95.

I used **evolved persons** to refer primarily to persons from the future, developmentally surpassing present people. Although they were not limited to earthly humans, the *Talks* refer to them mostly in this way. These persons have similar abilities and traits to contactees, namely the ability to connect with others telepathically. The average MCI score came up to 1.59. Most of the descriptions (16 out of 37) corresponded to person B. Evolved persons are described as capable of telepathy, long-lived, significantly taller, having different DNA helices, and being subject to karmic law and the law of reincarnation. Compared to regular persons, they have undergone developmental and spiritual evolutionary changes. Their physicality is breached by changed vibrational level, opened chakras and the ability to manipulate energy and send it out. They are also described as semi-material, this allowing them to be picked up by evacuation spaceships and travel through space.

8.1.3. Biology

I placed the concepts of universe, nature, planets, and the Earth into the thematic area of Biology, and from these, space, nature, and planets only appear occasionally. The **universe** fulfills the conditions for it to be placed into the category of spatial entities, **nature** corresponds to the intuitive expectations of solid objects, and **planets** are discussed as either solid objects or objects transferring animacy. Space is described as consisting of many different levels, making it a spatial entity with a transfer in physicality. However, The MCI score averages at 0.20, making it quite intuitive. Since nature can be cleansed of coarse vibrations, its physicality is breached. Due to the concept of nature (separately from planet Earth) only being addressed twice, the score is 0.5.

For the same reason, I consider nature an intuitive concept since there is no clear textual proof of it being thought of in a particular way. More clear descriptions may be included in the other *Talks* volumes and Benda's lectures, which I have not analyzed. On the other hand, I would personally consider the 0.5 score for the concept planets closer to MCI than to INT, given the animacy of the solid object. Due to the lack of additional descriptions available in the text analyzed, this gives room for further investigation.

As opposed to the rest, the concept of **the Earth** could be included in the thematic area of Biology and Spirituality. On the one hand, it is considered a planet; on the other hand, it is the "Mother Earth," deeply compassionate and capable of caring and suffering, understanding and being kind, with great love for its "children." This way of seeing the Earth is most likely rooted in the New Age movement and perceiving it as the wise and benevolent Gaia. In the first volume of *Talks*, she is regarded as a solid object breaching physicality because coarse and smooth vibrations impact her. As an M-living thing and A-solid object, it can feel pain, fight back against being mistreated, and cleanse itself. As an M-solid object, it has inner life and emotions, and fighting back through natural disasters is a deliberate defense.

8.1.4. Technology

Technology is more of a category of concepts rather than one particular part of a broader worldview. I included space stations and laboratories in this category since they frequently appear throughout the text sections but don't violate the set of expectations for solid objects. Their placement in space and highly-advanced, almost sci-fi technology is not contrary to the expectations put on space stations and laboratories of the present. At the

same time, the lived experiences of people largely influence the expectations of what is and is not possible, and since 1998 and the early 2000s, technology has progressed. Even though something akin to a bright screen could be seen as intuitive today, this would not be a universal understanding. To confirm my coding, these descriptions would have to be contrasted with the circumstances, focusing specifically on counter-schematics and shallow inferences.

In the thematic area of Technology, I included weapons, appliances, devices and machines, screens, faxes, cannons, and Cosmic People's and cosmic friends' homes and professional equipment. They are predominantly described as solid objects, but breaches of physicality occur as well. Usually, these breaches are simple, caused by the ability to manipulate energy or vibrations, transform vibrations, or emit energy beams and signals.

I classified spaceships as a separate concept. They are mentioned and described 69 times, with nine describing their counterintuitive features. With the highest running score being two and the lowest 0, spaceships scored as intuitive solid objects. Similarly to other examples of technology, physicality was breached by working with energy and vibrations, sending out energy waves and beams, and traveling through time and space, while the change to a semi-material form of human passengers was supposed to happen aboard the spaceships.[75]

Even though the idea of a spaceship does violate intuitive ontological expectations, the learned knowledge of its existence is not counter-schematic. Therefore, I coded spaceships, guns, and TV screens as intuitive, corresponding to the expectations put on them by cultural knowledge, scoring at 0.13.

8.2. Imminent Threat

All imminent threats could be encapsulated into the single concept of **Forces of Darkness**. There should also be a category for imminent natural disasters since the theme of imminent danger in the Universe People's belief system takes shape as a part of the warning against ecological, natural, and spiritual disaster and their causes. All of these are, however, the result of negative actions and coarse vibrations caused by the Forces of Darkness.

Because of the dichotomous view of good and evil, the motif of the universe being a battlefield in the fight between the forces of light and darkness is an essential topic in the Universe People's teaching and world-

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75 Benda, *Talks with Teachings from My Cosmic Friends*, 157-159.

view. The Forces of Darkness have created human bodies for humanity and try to keep them enslaved and exploit the Earth. To enslave humanity and prevent it from reaching individual and collective spiritual improvement, they insert chips into people's bodies, create a database of all people on the planet, and thus gain power over them. "Through religion and other information channels, the Forces of Darkness have constantly imposed on us an idea that they are our creators, but this is not true, for they simply forgot who had created them. (That's why they are Forces of Darkness, for the Creator is love and light, and they act and behave in just the opposite manner.)"[76] They control the world's institutions, are involved in politics, and use politics, media, and religion for control. In the end, the Forces of Light are to win.

Depending on the description provided in the text, the Forces of Darkness can be categorized as a person or a spatial entity. I have included Lucifer in the Forces of Darkness since there was only one mention of him as an R-spatial entity, and he did not significantly deviate from the rest.

The traits of the Forces of Darkness are very similar to those of extraterrestrial beings and cosmic friends. They can establish telepathic contact and transmit messages and images, travel through spacetime, manipulate energy, send out vibrations, and be present but unseen and unnoticed. Moreover, they can drain and send out energy, feed on coarse vibrations, manipulate humanity, and be hurt and fought off by positive thinking and smooth vibrations. Everything terrible and negative can be attributed to the Forces of Darkness or their actions. Their counterintuitiveness score averaged 0.7, putting the concept towards being an MCI.

9. Results Overview

Contrary to my initial expectation, most concepts identified in the *Talks* scored as minimally counterintuitive. I evaluated all the concept descriptions in the *Talks* and their running MCI scores and arrived at values between 0 and 2 (see Tab. 2). I consider a quantified MCI score of 0.5 to be minimally counterintuitive, albeit the counterintuitiveness is weak. The concepts within *Talks* fall into the cognitive optimum and, despite the information the reader is given about them, are not overtly complicated or outright bizarre, with only a few instances of MXCI. In my research, however, I did not consider the number of appearances throughout the text sections.

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76 Benda, *Talks with Teachings from My Cosmic Friends*, 4.

Concept	Count	Most common category	Average MCI score	Standard deviation
Contactee	48	person-B	1.95	1.89
evolved persons	37	person-B	1.59	1.11
Cosmic People	102	person-B	1.49	1.50
cosmic friends	144	person-B, P	1.32	1.02
the Creator	114	M-spatial entity	0.84	0.58
Jesus Christ	9	person-B, P	1.00	0.70
the Earth	9	A-solid object	1.00	0.00
extraterrestrial beings	11	person-B	1.00	0.63
Forces of Darkness	72	person-B	0.70	0.61
technology	22	solid object	0.50	0.52
Nature	2	solid object	0.50	0.70
planets	4	solid object	0.50	0.57
spaceships	69	solid object	0.13	0.33
universe	5	spatial entity	0.20	0.44

Tab. 2: Overview of the final concepts

The first column of Tab. 2 lists the names of the concepts identified in the analyzed text. The second column states the amount of each concept's codeable appearances. The third column shows the essential category of the ideas that they fit into the most often. Transfers within the category are indicated by a capital letter in the prefix of the category and breaches as a capital letter in the suffix.[77] Transfers within the category are indicated by a capital letter in the suffix of the category and breaches by a capital letter in the suffix. Each violation or transfer counted as one point towards the running average counterintuitiveness of the category in question. The fourth column shows the average counterintuitiveness score of the concepts in question, achieved by averaging the running scores obtained by coding the concepts' individual appearances. This final counterintuitiveness score illustrates the average cognitive load of each idea on the reader of the text. Standard deviations are listed in the last column.

Varied descriptions of the concepts and ideas were likely caused by inconsistencies due to the number of contactees and their interpretations of

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77 E.g., a person breaching the expectations of biology was written down as "person-B," a solid object transferring a biological feature as a "B-solid object."

the alleged contacts. The inconsistency is present throughout the text due to the number of contacts and the fact that the messages were collected over almost four years.

10. Discussion and Concluding Remarks

For analysis and coding, I divided the text into 390 sections and sorted them into five thematic areas according to their main thematic focus. In those sections, I identified 16 concepts with the average quantified score of between 0 and 2. The concepts with a score of 0.5 were counterintuitive since the nature of these concepts (technology, nature, planets) allows for only a slight disruption of expectations. The few instances of multiple disruptions were balanced by other, less counterintuitive appearances of the concepts in question. The most intuitive concept was technology, while the most counterintuitive were contactees, evolved persons, Cosmic People, and cosmic friends (see Tab. 2). From the MCI theory perspective, the majority (13 out of 16) of the concepts carry the potential for increasing attractiveness to potential believers.

The MCI score of the majority of the Universe People's religious concepts corresponds to the cognitive optimum, allowing the concepts to use the human cognitive system for their retention, transmission, and recall.[78] This, however, is true for individual MCIs or their smaller, contextually connected groups. With the belief system being very complex, the sheer quantity of these concepts can have too much of a cognitive load.

The role of the context within which the concepts appear should be taken into account as well since "[t]he spreading activation model suggests that when a concept is processed and is activated, the activation spreads out to its connected neighbors as a function of the strengths of their mutual connections,"[79] meaning that some concepts are more strongly related to other particular ones,[80] and the recall of contextually-placed MCI concepts is better,[81] with the surrounding concepts and ideas providing an interpretational framework.

The concepts scored here were minimally counterintuitive on average, but their appearance throughout the text is frequent, not mutually con-

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78 Banerjee, Haque, and Spelke, "Melting Lizards and Crying Mailboxes;" Gonce et al., "Imagery Effects on Recall;" Purzycki and Willard, "MCI Theory;" Sperber, "Anthropology and Psychology;" Sperber, *Explaining Culture*.

79 Upal, "An Alternative Account," 197.

80 Upal, "An Alternative Account," 196-197.

81 Upal, "An Alternative Account," 199; Boyer, *Cognitive Aspects of Religious Symbolism*, 36-37; Sperber, "Anthropology and Psychology."

nected, and their descriptions are inconsistent.[82] The Universe People's teaching is saturated with many MCI concepts that are not cognitively challenging. The belief system, however, was spread as a compilation of the ideas in question, embedded in a larger narrative framework.

There are undeniably some issues with the MCI theory, which bleed into the method. This doesn't necessarily make the theory obsolete; instead, it calls for interdisciplinarity and additional testing using other complementary methods and theories to provide more complex results. MCI theory provides a strong framework for understanding the memorability and subsequent transmission of concepts based on the cognitive structures of the human mind. To study meanings as well as mechanisms, an interdisciplinary approach should be engaged to provide additional theories with a wider range of available methods, and to broaden the perspective.

The coding process involves some subjectivity, especially when working with a long, complicated text full of subjective and sometimes fragmented individual messages compiled into a book. Despite efforts to minimize the subjectivity of the person doing the coding, the process still involves some degree of interpretation. For this paper, I proceeded with a content-based approach. It is necessary to preface that another researcher might disagree with the coding of some of the concepts presented in this paper and could follow up with more extensive, more detailed research, highlighting the cultural background and influence of the text's readers.

As the results show, my initial expectation of the concepts in the Universe People's belief system being too counterintuitive and complicated to be enjoyable and memorable was proved wrong. The concepts fall primarily within the cognitive optimum, meaning they should be memorable and spreadable. The belief system's lack of success in remaining attractive and relevant doesn't lie in the counterintuitiveness of the concepts. The text contains many messages collected over a long period and situationally tied to the group and other societal, social, ideological, political, or economic factors. External factors and the cognitive load of the text as a whole, in this case, override the content-based findings of this paper.

The concept's relevance for potential believers is primarily influenced by social learning and narrative, social and cultural context, not only memorability and transfer potential. The analysis of other materials, written images, and lectures would provide further, more detailed information, and it would be good to set it into a societal context, which is unfortu-

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82 For example, in some text sections, the Creator is described as pure love, light, or the creator of the universe akin to God, but in others, he is talked about as if he were an important person, giving instructions to his employees.

nately outside of the scope of this paper. It would be exciting to follow up with a qualitative perspective on the Universe People's belief system – for example, by exploring individual experiences and motivations through interviews with group members or readers of the texts. Another promising approach is ethnography, which directly studies the interactions between believers, remaining group members, or lecture attendees, and how personal interactions affect the attractiveness of ideas, concepts, and belief systems.

Remembering and telling something is not the same as believing in it; these should be treated as different things. In the case of concepts presented in the *Talks*, a large number of intentional agents, such as contactees, cosmic friends, or the Creator, meet Barrett's criteria for successful god representations.[83] The descriptions of the concepts imply counterintuitiveness; their categorizations as a person show intentionality and the ability to communicate with humanity, sharing strategic information, which means acting in a detectable way and motivating, or at least intending to encourage, the behavior of members of the Universe People, listeners of lectures, and readers of the *Talks*.

As opposed to this, technology and spaceships carry minimally counterintuitive features, such as violations of the physical properties of solid objects. On the other hand, some things, such as ships flying through space or interactive screens, meet schematic expectations. However, these currently exist in reality, presented as tools used by extraterrestrial beings, and do not violate the laws of physics. Instead, the inspiration stems from science fiction and the idea of a utopian, highly developed, and spiritually evolved society.

The inner structure of the Universe People at the time of the creation of the first volume of the *Talks* was democratized, with the contactee status given by a higher power and through individual efforts for self-development. Close personal relationships were formed between the members and the supposed extraterrestrial beings, regardless of the members' abilities to channel the messages transmitted since the messages were shared at lectures and group meetings. This allowed them to obtain new information and sources and build relationships with other group members[84] and allowed the group to stay dynamic, evolve, and innovate as needed.

The number of individual MCI concepts in one volume of the central texts cannot fully explain the attractivity of the group's belief system as a whole. Also, because I worked with only one of the ten *Talks* volumes, I couldn't consider all the ideas and concepts available and account for

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83 Barrett, "Santa Claus," 150.
84 Stark and Bainbridge, "Of Churches, Sects, and Cults," 126.

their possible progress. The time of publication of the text analyzed also matches the initial rapid development of the group, and I was thus unable to account for the later development of the Universe People's belief system. Furthermore, I did not consider any other sources apart from the text, such as the group's public activities, media appearances, members' meetings, public lectures, and individual appeals to believers and converts, leaving out the relative importance of the individual elements of belief to group members.

Despite the limitations imposed by focusing purely on the text of the first volume of *Talks*, this research yields an interesting finding. The concepts identified fall within the cognitive optimum and have a high potential for being successfully remembered, transmitted, and spread. However, this does not apply to their compilation, as the total cumulative amount of concepts results in their high cognitive load.

This suggests that the cognitive load of the newly-emerging teachings of new religious movements and the unusual ideas of UFO religions can be a significant factor in their memorability, transmission, and attractiveness for current and potential group members.