

Presumed Immanent: the Raélians, UFO Religions, and the Postmodern Condition

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In 1974, Claude Vorilhon (later Raël), a French race-car driver, pop singer, and journalist, published *Le Livre Qui Dit La Vérité (sic)* (*The Book Which Tells the Truth*), his first book describing his meeting with extraterrestrials and their revelations concerning humankind and the cosmos. Today, the Raélian religion is the largest “flying saucer religion” in the world, claiming a membership of 35,000 in eighty-five countries.¹ It is millenarian and evangelistic in its goals, yet world-affirming in its orientation towards society. Raélians do not fit the anti-cult movement’s stereotype of a cult (which new religious movement does?), nor do they correspond neatly to Roy Wallis’s tripartite typology of “world rejecting/affirming/accommodating” new religious movements (NRMs).² Thus, Raélians present an enigma: they are fundamentalists but also modernists. Their actions are based on the belief in the literal and infallible truth embodied in their sacred texts, Raël’s accounts of his meetings and communications with his extraterrestrials, the Elohim, “those who come from the sky.” These texts bear at least a *prima facie* consistency with Robert S. Ellwood’s suggestion that the appeal of “UFO cults” might reside in their offering “classic religious eschatologies revamped to meet the fears and dramas of the modern world.”³ In this study, we will explore the Raélian eschatology within the context of the “fears and dramas of the modern world” and the historical horizon within which the modern world and Raélianism both find their context. Briefly, Raélianism replaces the supernatural with the extraterrestrial and technological in order to demystify and demythologize primarily the Abrahamic religions, simultaneously (if unconsciously) mythologizing and ideologizing science and technology. The Raélian hermeneutic and attendant worldview ground their unique—if somewhat extreme—solutions to some of the most troubling topics of the late twentieth century, such as ecology, sexuality, and globalization, concerns shared by many other UFO religions.

Despite its explicit protestation that its members are not ufologists,⁴ the Raélian religion would not exist if it were not for the historical advent

of the UFO phenomenon. In his *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*, Carl Jung proposes that flying saucers

are manifestations of psychic changes which always appear at the end of one Platonic month and at the beginning of another. Apparently they are changes in the constellation of psychic dominants, or the archetypes, or "gods" as they used to be called, which bring about . . . long-lasting transformations of the collective psyche.⁵

The historical developments accompanying or marking Jung's "changes in the constellation of psychic dominants" are the advent of a global culture and its simultaneous division into two mortally-adversarial camps armed with the newly-discovered and harnessed energies at the nucleus of the atom. Regarding this transformation, Jung insightfully points out that "the whole collective psychological problem that has been opened up by the Saucer epidemic stands in compensatory antithesis to our scientific picture of the world."⁶ Where Jung, perhaps, would see this compensation relative only to the historical developments following World War II and the beginning of the Cold War, a bolder and more far-reaching thesis would propose that the appearance of UFOs on our historical horizon as objects inspiring religious behavior "stands in compensatory antithesis" to the scientific worldview as such and its practical, social, and spiritual effects since the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions, and that this standing "in compensatory antithesis" is ambivalent, being simultaneously an affirmation, critique, and transcendence of science and technology and the mortal threats they are seen as presenting, e.g., the environmental crisis and the danger of nuclear war. New religious movements arising within the context of the contemporary developed world, whose sources of revelation are extraterrestrial, spontaneously take their space age deities to be merely natural or immanent rather than supernatural or transcendent, precisely because they exist within the horizon of our postmodern condition, i.e., within the horizon of the death of God.

THE DEATH OF GOD AND THE POSTMODERN CONDITION AS THE ASCENDANCY OF THE NATURAL SCIENTIFIC INTERPRETATION OF THE WORLD

Both the death of God and postmodernity are admittedly ambivalent notions. Philosophically, the postmodern condition has been articulated as an "incredulity toward metanarratives" (overarching, universal explanations, e.g., the Christian eschatological version of human history)⁷ or the death of the Cartesian subject as the epistemological and metaphysical foundation of the modern, scientific worldview.⁸ Less philosophically, however, the death of God signifies the replacement of

a theological interpretation of the world by a natural scientific interpretation. The death of God is, then, the withdrawal or dispersion or disappearance of the metaphysical, the supernatural, or the supersensuous world upon which hitherto the sensuous, natural, physical world relied for its substance, meaning, and value.⁹ Contemporary science and technology do not need to include God, the Absolute, or Being in their theories, measurements, calculations, or planning; the discourse of science and technology that dominates our practical affairs devalues the ideas of God, the Absolute, and Being. The social effects of this change in dominant worldviews are well-known. Existing religions were increasingly required to justify themselves against the theoretical and practical worlds articulated and constructed during the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions, often fighting a losing battle, so that today secular consciousness understands the earth to be but one planet orbiting one of billions of stars, it and its sun billions of years old, this planet the home of *Homo sapiens* who are only one of millions of species, each but a momentary genetic variation proper to the momentary environment within which it lives.

NRMS WITHIN THE HORIZON OF THE DEATH OF GOD

New religious movements arising within the context of the disappearance of the supersensuous world articulate themselves, often with a popular fluency, in the discourses of the natural sciences and seek to justify their beliefs by means of para- or pseudoscientific investigation or argument. For example, Sir Oliver Lodge dedicates *The Survival of Man* (1915) (a work on life-after-death) to “the founders of the Society for Psychical Research, the truest and most patient workers in an unpopular religion of science.”¹⁰ The researches of the society were attempts to reinvent, transform, or translate beliefs about the unseen or invisible world into the discourse (and truth conditions) of the natural sciences. As J. Gordon Melton observes, since 1750, many of those who claim contact with otherworldly beings articulate themselves relative to the scientific discourse of the day.¹¹ Something new has appeared in the past five hundred years to which religions old and new have felt required to react either by attacking or conversing. Simply put, the present takes as given the scientific worldview; so, new religious intuitions that seek to articulate themselves often take for granted the truth of that worldview and seek to harmonize it with religious sentiments. Thus NRMs whose theology is centered around otherworldly beings paradoxically attempt to articulate a religious worldview within a purely immanent horizon wherein the gods no longer hail from a region outside of space and time (i.e., outside nature) but from some distant planet, star, or dimension.

Not only are these UFO religions' gods now only extraterrestrial or interdimensional beings, but, because of their miraculous technology, their immanence is ambivalent and marginal to the immanence of nature the natural sciences assume. However, since these beings must coexist with the laws of nature that the natural sciences propound and technology exploits, the peripherality of these beings is interpreted as a paranormality, an existing within a realm yet-to-be-understood by science. The technology of the flying saucer is miraculous not in terms of transcending the laws of nature, but in terms of our present ("primitive") understanding of these laws. John Saliba's solid and comprehensive study confirms this collapsing of the miraculous into the super-technological, especially in the case of Christian interpretations of UFO phenomena.¹² These two ideas—that in time our science will come to understand paranormal phenomena (and thereby acquire new technologies of paranormal power) and that the ufonauts are technologically and spiritually more advanced or superior to us—orbit an affirmation of science and technology that takes them to be natural to all forms of intelligent life, on and off the earth, thereby ideologizing the First World's dominant cultural practice. Furthermore, these two absolutely contingent (and perhaps profoundly short-lived) cultural accidents (i.e., science and technology) are understood not only as natural but as progressing or evolving. Alongside or bound up with this assumption of science as a naturally evolving universal tendency of life is the belief that the way out of the profound problems the industrialization of the earth has presented is technological ingenuity itself. Indeed, the argument often offered for funding a search for extraterrestrial intelligence (well-known by its acronym, SETI) is that any race advanced enough for interstellar communication will have undergone the crises we ourselves presently face and, therefore, may share their solutions to our most pressing ecological problems. Thus, an optimism is part and parcel of the mere appearance of flying saucers as extraterrestrial spaceships (whether "nuts-and-bolts" or of a "higher etheric vibratory plane") and of the revelations and admonitions of their pilots. Within the context of the developed world, whose development is taken as the product of a natural tendency of intelligence, the flying saucer appears, furthermore, as both critique (as existing at and thereby showing the limits of a particular viewpoint) and transcendence (as ultimate and assured goal) of the present.

Those NRMs for whom the UFO is a vehicle of enlightenment occur not only within the horizon of the death of God, but, more narrowly, within that of the UFO phenomenon as such. More specifically, their membership belongs to that social group which affirms what in ufological circles is called the extra-terrestrial hypothesis (ETH), which proposes that "real" UFOs (i.e., those that are not misidentifications or hallucinations) are spaceships manufactured and piloted by intelligent,

extraterrestrial creatures. Some proponents of the ETH are “contactees” who claim to have had communication, whether face-to-face or telepathic, with the ufonauts and to have received from them religious messages or missions. Around some of these contactees, NRMs have formed, such as George King’s Aetherius Society,¹³ Ruth Norman’s Unarius,¹⁴ and Marshall Herff Applewhite’s and Bonnie Lu Nettles’ Human Individual Metamorphosis¹⁵ (later to become Heaven’s Gate), among many others.

THE RAE LIAN RELIGION: INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY

While a passing familiarity with the discourses of UFO religions suggests they all address the same family of concerns, each has evolved its own answers and solutions. Those of Raël are strikingly original. They offer, on the one hand, a critical view of society, politics, morals, and the environment, while, on the other hand, outlining an optimistic vision of the transcendence of these quandaries. Raël’s creative theology corresponds closely to the characteristics noted by Jung in his study of the psychological significance of the flying saucer, characteristics which Jung felt accounted for our deep fascination for this phenomenon. Raël addresses the profound trepidation evoked by the threat of a global nuclear holocaust by criticizing our aggressive abuse of the fruits of science and technology, and by encouraging our corresponding aspirations to become equal to our creators, who are “25,000 years ahead of us.”

The “truth” communicated to Raël by his extraterrestrial teachers is essentially an interpretation of the Bible analogous to that of proponents of the ancient astronaut hypothesis. Saliba sums up the ancient astronaut Biblical hermeneutic as follows:

God becomes an astronaut, a superior being who lives in a more advanced civilization in some other faraway galaxy. Divine revelations are nothing but teachings from space creatures and miracles are awesome interventions by intelligences who are technologically superior to the human race. The supernatural, in this view, is reduced to the super-technological. God is a superior humanoid creature living on another planet. He has made himself immortal through technology and has created the human race¹⁶

This view (always marked by reading Ezekiel’s vision as a UFO sighting report) has found popular expression for some decades now. The year 1968 is a watershed for the widespread paperback publication of this genre of ufological literature: Erick Von Däniken’s first two books were published in German; in England, W. Raymond Drake’s theosophically-inclined *Gods and Spacemen in the Ancient East*; in America, Otto Binder’s

Unsolved Mysteries of the Past; and most significantly Jean Sendy's quasi-cabalist *La Lune: Clé de la Bible*. This last book, along with Sendy's two others (all published in French before 1970), essay an ancient-astronaut reading of Genesis and the Bible at points identical to Raël's. Similar views are expressed in Jacques Bergier's *Extraterrestrial Visitations from Prehistoric Times to the Present* and Serge Hutin's *Alien Races and Fantastic Civilizations*, both published in French in 1970. That views strikingly similar to Raël's precede the publication of his own does not necessarily entail any plagiarism on his part, but their presence and popularity certainly aids in understanding the appeal of Raël's overtly religious articulation of these views.¹⁷

RAEL'S FIRST ENCOUNTER AND THE FOUNDING OF MADECH

The story of the Raëlian religion (first known as MADECH, then, between 1975 and 1995, as the Raëlian Movement International) begins on 13 December 1973, in the Clermont-Ferrand region of France. Vorilhon relates in his first book, *Le Livre Qui Dit La Vérité (The Book Which Tells the Truth)*, how, on this date, he witnessed a flying saucer land and met its small, greenish, humanoid occupant, who identified himself as one of the Elohim of Genesis.¹⁸ Vorilhon boarded the flying saucer, and the extraterrestrial explained over the course of six days the "true" meaning of the Bible, the essence of which constitutes the majority of Raël's "Message." Broadly, the message is that all life on earth is neither the end product of divine creation nor that of continuing evolution, but the creation of extraterrestrial biotechnologists who made all life "from scratch" by means of their complete knowledge of—and ability to synthesize and manipulate—DNA. *Homo sapiens* is "created in their own image." The Elohim's revelation is, essentially, a reading of the Bible as the story of an extraterrestrial biotechnological research project, whose drama bears a curious resemblance to present-day research and debate. The reason the Elohim created life on Earth is that the population of their own planet feared the consequences of experiments in biotechnology and the creation of artificial life forms. The Elohim scientists were required to remove their research to a distant planet for safety's sake.¹⁹ Their creation of creatures in their own image, as well as their revealing to their creations their true artificial nature (and thereby the newly-made human beings' power to create new life, in turn, by technological means), were both surreptitious and illegal acts, whose consequences were the expulsion from Eden and the Flood, i.e., the termination of the experiment and the sterilization of laboratory Earth. In this reading of Genesis, Yahweh becomes the leader of the scientists who created all life on Earth; the Serpent, those Elohim who gave to humankind the knowledge of good and evil, i.e., the awareness of their

being artificial life forms; and Satan, the leader of the faction on the Elohim's home planet critical of the scientists' research and its results.²⁰ That this scenario bears on present anxieties concerning biotechnology needs little explanation. In fact, the Raëlian religion pointed to the widely-publicized cloning of Dolly as confirmation of the Elohim's revelations, i.e., that humanity is attaining a level of technology already reached by the Elohim in Earth's distant past.²¹

The message given to Vorilhon by his extraterrestrial teacher is comprised not only of this ancient-astronaut interpretation of the Bible, but also of a set of "New Commandments" founded upon this vision of humanity as an artificial and purely material creation of a technologically advanced and spiritually enlightened race of extraterrestrial scientists. With this prescriptive portion of the message, Vorilhon was given a new, charismatic name, "Raël" ("light of God," "light" or "Ambassador of the Elohim," "messenger").²² Raël is told to promote world government by "the most intelligent," a system called "Geniocracy," wherein "[o]nly those who have an intellectual coefficient of at least 50% above the average will be eligible for a public post, and those who will be able to vote will have an intellectual coefficient of at least 10% above the average."²³ This one-world government also includes the institution of a single, world-wide currency and an international, artificial language.²⁴ In addition to the global unification of currencies, the Elohim's prescribed economic reforms also include an economic system they call "Humanitarianism," based primarily upon the abolition of inheritance.²⁵ The condition for this one-world economy and government is the elimination of military conscription.²⁶ Raël is then given the mission to spread the message of humankind's true origins and destiny and to build an embassy "on neutral territory" where the Elohim will land and meet the representatives of all nations if a sufficient number of human beings come to believe in them and humanity abandons its warlike ways.²⁷ In this case, the Elohim will share their advanced scientific knowledge with humanity, ushering in a "Golden Age" of peace and prosperity. The practical implementation of the message began with the founding of MADECH (*Mouvement pour Accueil des Elohim Createurs de l'Humanité*) in 1974 and the publication of Raël's first book.

RAEL'S SECOND ENCOUNTER

Raël's second close encounter and contact allegedly occurred on 7 October 1975 and is recounted in his second book, published in French the same year, *Les Extra-terrestres M'Ont Emmené Sur Leur Planète* (*Extraterrestrials Took Me to Their Planet*).²⁸ As the title attests, this book recounts a twenty-four-hour visit to a paradisaical planet "relatively close to the Earth," where Raël is further enlightened as to the nature of humankind and its creators. His Elohim teacher now identifies himself

as Yahweh, “president of the council of eternal.” Raël is introduced to Jesus, Moses, Elijah, Buddha, and Muhammad, now immortal by means of serial cloning. Not only does a 700-member Elohim council of eternal inhabit the planet, but 8,400 “people from Earth . . . who, during their lives, reached a sufficient level of open-mindedness on the infinite, or who enabled humanity to progress from its primitive level by their discoveries, their writings, their way of organizing society, their exemplary acts of fraternity, of love or of unselfishness.”²⁹ Raël is shown the machine that instantaneously manufactures the clones whereby the Elohim and deserving human beings maintain their immortality. A temporary clone of Raël himself is produced from a cell sample taken from between his eyes. Not only are the deserving rewarded with immortality by means of cloning, but “[a]ll those on Earth who preached violence, wickedness, aggressiveness, and obscurantism . . . will be recreated to undergo the punishment which they deserve after being judged by those whom they made suffer or by their ancestors or descendants.”³⁰ This technology, together with extensive automatization, accomplishes “all the dirty work [and] all the work that is uninteresting [i.e.,] all the maintenance work” by means of “biological robots.”³¹ Not only do these robots perform all the onerous and tiresome labor, but they also provide erotic pleasure, as six female robots, one of each human race, demonstrate during Raël’s first and only night on the Elohim’s planet.³² Later, back on Earth, Raël is telepathically given supplementary commandments and sixteen “Keys” which highlight and expand the original message. Humanitarianism and geniocracy are reaffirmed and explained in somewhat greater detail. “The transmission of the cellular plan” is introduced, whereby a Raëlian’s genetic code is transmitted to the Elohim and a square centimeter of bone tissue from between the eyes is secured to facilitate being cloned on the planet of eternal after death. A system of tithing is advocated, to help Raël, “the Guide of Guides . . . devote himself full time to his mission.”³³ A relatively detailed code of behavior is presented, covering diet (e.g., prohibiting stimulants and recreational drugs), sexual behavior, child rearing and education, and meditative practices.

THE SCHISM WITHIN MADECH, THE FOUNDING AND CONSOLIDATION OF THE RAE LIAN MOVEMENT INTERNATIONAL, AND THE PRESENT-DAY RAE LIAN RELIGION

In 1976 the Raëlian Movement International emerged out of a schism within MADECH. The membership of the new movement was divided into two levels: the more committed “Guides” who composed the “Structure” and the more loosely affiliated “Raëlians” who received the bulletin *Apocalypse*. This restructuring and the articulation of social and ethical values combined to create a relatively stable structure of

organization and beliefs that continues to this day. Following this consolidation, Raël was to devote an entire volume to his teachers' political philosophy,³⁴ as well as to the practice of "sensual meditation." In this meditative method, the practitioner aims at attaining telepathic communication with the Elohim, activates his or her psychic potential, and grows new neural pathways.³⁵ In 1979, Raël published *Accueillier Les Extra-Terrestres* (later translated and published in English as *Let's Welcome Our Fathers from Space: They Created Humanity in Their Laboratories* (1986)), wherein his charismatic claims are amplified.³⁶ It is revealed to him that the Eloha Yahweh is his father and Jesus his half-brother; he is the "last of forty prophets," being born in "the Age of Apocalypse," i.e., in the era following the detonation of the first atomic bomb, the discovery of DNA, and the revelation of humankind's true nature, through Raël, by the Elohim. Despite these amplifications, this latter book is essentially a reformulation and repetition of earlier material. Though there have been some additions to the message since the mid-1980s, none are so radical as to substantially alter the basic character of the religion. Indeed, the development of and the debate around biotechnology, and the popularization of the idea of "terraforming" serve—admittedly, to a limited extent—to harmonize the religion's concerns with more mainstream society.

Today, the message continues to be spread according to annual instructions Raël receives telepathically from the Eloha Yahweh, his father. These instructions name a particular nation which is to be the special focus of the movement for that coming year. The movement's own version of its history is organized according to year and country in this way. Furthermore, in 1985, the movement instituted Planetary Week, to be held commencing each April 5, focused around a different theme each year. Each national branch of the religion is encouraged to hold a conference to publicize the message. To court the press, often an outrageous or controversial act is performed. Actions considered outrageous by more mainstream society are not restricted to the branches' conferences. As the *Toronto Star* reported on 11 November 1992, the Raélians distributed 10,000 condoms to Roman Catholic high school students in Montreal, Canada, putatively to protest the Montreal Catholic School Commission's decision against installing condom dispensers in its high schools. Consistent with the goal of one-world government and planetary political unity is the movement's advocacy of racial integration—not through intermarriage and procreation, but through interracial sexual relationships. In photographs, Raël is sometimes depicted as surrounded by a racially mixed circle of bikini-clad young women, reminiscent of promotional photographs for a Miss World Beauty Pageant.³⁷ In addition, as the *Montreal Gazette* reported on 30 September 1997, the religion opened UFO Land near Valcourt, Quebec, as a theme park presenting the message by means of multimedia

displays. Most recently, on 18 June 1999, the religion organized a bilingual “conference-debate” entitled “Yes to Human Cloning” in Montreal.³⁸

THE RÆLIAN RELIGION: BELIEFS, VALUES, AND POLITICS

Beliefs

The Raëlian religion, from its inception, rigorously excises all residue of the transcendent in its rereading of the Bible according to its own version of the ancient astronaut hypothesis. Cosmologically, any supernatural realm where a First Cause, for life or the cosmos, might reside is excluded by positing an infinite regression of causes in answer to the question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” The cosmos extends infinitely into the past and future.³⁹ Likewise, the material (i.e., atomic) order extends into the infinitely small and large. The atom is depicted as a microcosmic solar system; the solar system, a macrocosmic atom, and so on. As Raël explains it:

Once we have attained sufficient open-mindedness we can understand that in space the Earth is but a particle of the atom of the atoms of the hand of a gigantic being, who himself contemplates a starlit sky which composes the hand, the stomach or the foot of a being even more gigantic, who finds himself under a sky, etc., etc. and this ad infinitum. The same process applies for the infinitely small. On the atom of the atoms of our hands, there exist intelligent beings for whom these particles are planets and stars, and these beings are composed of atoms of which the particles are the stars and the planets on which there are intelligent beings, etc., etc. . . . also to Infinity.⁴⁰

It is no exaggeration, then, to characterize the Raëlian cosmology as being one of absolute immanence. That this immanence is, furthermore, exclusively material is reinforced not only by the identical atomistic structures of the micro- and macrocosmos (“as above, so below” in Raëlian terms), but by the derision terms such as “immaterial” or “impalpable” receive, especially when predicated of more orthodox depictions of God. Already in his first book, Raël’s Elohim teacher speaks in a manner which echoes the more popular understanding of the death of God:

In scientifically developed countries . . . [n]o one can believe any longer in a “heavenly God” with a white beard, perched upon a cloud, omniscient and omnipotent, which is what the Church wants us to believe in. Neither can they believe in delightful little guardian angels, nor in a devil with horns and hooves. . . .⁴¹

In its views concerning the origins of humanity, the Raëlian religion is no less consistent in its insistent monistic materialism. Where almost all other proponents of the ancient-astronaut biblical hermeneutic interpret *Homo sapiens* to be a hybrid of “those who come from the heavens” (in Genesis “Sons of God”) and protohuman females (“Daughters of Men”) (Genesis 6:2), Raël is more radical: his Elohim reveal that humankind is literally made in their image by means of biotechnology. Indeed, the Elohim are responsible for all life on earth. Furthermore, Raël explains in a section of his *Let's Welcome Our Fathers from Space* entitled “Questions Which Are Most Often Asked” that the Elohim in turn are themselves the creation of another, superior race, who in turn are themselves created in the same manner.⁴² This regress of artifice, Raël is told, is infinite: there is no original life whose source is evolution or some supernatural Creator. Evolution is refuted by the Elohim on the grounds that chance mutation coupled to natural selection is incapable of developing higher organisms. As Raël writes:

As Einstein said, there can not be a watch without a watch-maker. All those people who believe that we come from the monkey through a slow evolutionary process, believe that the beautiful watch which we are, has built itself, by accident. It is a bit like saying that if we put all the components of a watch together in a bag and shook it around for a while, we would eventually get a perfect working watch.⁴³

The Raëlian religion's thoroughgoing atomistic materialism erases not only the distinction between God and Nature but between soul and body; just as there is only material nature, so there is only a physical body. Nonetheless, the traditional promise of immortality for true believers is maintained, as remarked above: immortality by means of cloning. The initiatory rite of the Raëlian religion is the “transmission of the cellular plan,” whereby a new member's genetic code is telepathically transmitted to the Elohim by a Guide, insuring the practicing member's recreation after death on the planet of eternal, as well as formalizing that member's recognition of the Elohim as his or her creator. Furthermore, the new member is encouraged to sign a contract permitting a mortician, upon the member's demise, to excise one square centimeter of the “frontal bone” (near the pineal gland or “third eye”), which is then sent to a bank in Geneva, Switzerland to be stored, awaiting collection by the Elohim. According to Raël:

The cellular plan, or genetic code, of each individual, is registered in an enormous computer which records all our actions during our life, from the time of our conception, from the meeting of the ovule and the spermatozoon, the moment when a new genetic code is registered, hence, a new individual. The individual will be followed through his lifetime, and at the end of his life, the computer will know if he has the right to eternal life on the planet where the Elohim accept in their midst, only the most worthy of men and women.⁴⁴

This characterization of human beings as “nothing more than self-programming, self-reproducing biological computers (*sic*)”⁴⁵ grounds the Raëlian promise of immortality for the deserving. In the Raëlian view, the person is identical to his or her genetic code. During his first encounter, Raël’s Elohim teacher explains the means by which an individual gains immortality technologically:

When we are in full possession of our abilities and our brain is at its maximum efficiency and knowledge, we surgically remove a tiny part of the body which is conserved. When we die, from a minute particle of our body which had already been preserved, we fully recreate the body, as it was at that time. I say as it was at that time, meaning with all its scientific knowledge, and of course, its personality.⁴⁶

This version of the serial recreation of the individual is later modified, in that an actual, physical particle is not necessary, as “the enormous computer which records all our actions” also records our genetic codes, whereby those deserving are “recreated young, with a body in full possession of its force and its resources.”⁴⁷ Where the Raëlian belief concerning immortality by means of cloning may well appear questionable to those familiar with the arguments of identity theory and functionalism in the philosophy of mind, there is no denying that a version of science and technology is being used here to articulate a new religious intuition in terms immediately familiar to a populace for whom the science of genetics and biotechnology and their consequences for how we conceive of life and the person have become quotidian.

Values

Given the centrality of the technology of cloning to the Raëlian religion’s worldview, it comes as no surprise that the religion gives its whole-hearted support to developments in biotechnology. The Raëlian religion has come out explicitly in favor of genetically-altered foods, vegetable and animal, on the grounds that since all living matter is originally artificial, the more genetically artificial an organism, the more “natural” it is.⁴⁸ The Raëlian support for the development of cloning technology, on the other hand, has been more than merely rhetorical. In a press conference held 11 March 1997 in the Las Vegas Flamingo Hilton, Raël announced he had created Valiant Venture Ltd. with a group of investors. The company offers “Cloneaid” for parents wishing to clone, rather than procreate, a child—at a cost of US\$200,000. The venture also offers “insuraclone” that for \$50,000 will store a client’s child’s cells so the child may be cloned in the event of an untimely death. This company was founded in the Bahamas, where cloning is not illegal.⁴⁹ Furthermore, on 13 January 1998, the religion announced its support, moral and financial, for the research of Chicago-based scientist Dr. Richard Seed, who claimed that he will have cloned a baby by mid-1999.

Though no Raëlian himself, Dr. Seed's own words, as reported in an article in the *Ottawa Citizen*, express sentiments not dissimilar to Raël's: "Cloning and the reprogramming of DNA is the first serious step in becoming one with God." That such activities have generated controversy is no surprise. The Bahamian government froze the assets of Valiant Venture Ltd. Dr. Brigitte Boisellier was fired from her position as director of a research project for a chemical company in Lyons, France, reportedly for speaking publicly in favor of cloning and admitting to being a Raëlian on television. Dr. Boisellier has said, "Why do people always think about the bad things scientific advances can bring? Why not assume that people are good and will use this knowledge in a responsible way?"⁵⁰ Her optimism is matched by a kind of "happy positivism": she has remarked that what can be done, will be done, and it is better to do it openly and legally so as to prevent exploitation. Such *amor fati* relative to technology is characteristically Raëlian.

The Raëlian enthusiasm for cloning is only one aspect of its general approval of all reproductive technology. The Raëlian affirmation of reproductive technologies finds its context in relation to the religion's approach to individual sexual behavior. Since "life was made to be enjoyed,"⁵¹ heterosexual sex is to be emancipated by artificial means from procreation. The use of contraception, including abortion, is prescribed as a means to accomplish this emancipation, as well as a means to solve problems of overpopulation.⁵² All manner of polymorphous consensual sexual activity, hetero-, bi-, or homosexual, is likewise affirmed. Indeed, Cloneaid explicitly offers its services to homosexual couples wanting children. As Raël himself succinctly phrases it in *Let's Welcome Our Fathers from Space*, "each individual has the right to do with their body as he or she sees fit."⁵³ The extreme value placed on sexuality is best exemplified by the practice of directed hedonistic sensuousness ("sensual meditation"), which is perceived as means to altered states of consciousness, mystical panenhenic states of oneness with the universe, and telepathic communication with the Elohim. Sexual activity in particular and sensuality in general are said to produce brain cells and to improve neural links.⁵⁴ As Raël writes in the Keys:

the moment you approach closest to perfect harmony with infinity is when this takes place in your room of sensual meditation with someone you love, by physically uniting with him, and placing yourselves in harmony with infinity during your union.⁵⁵

Politics

Where the Raëlian approach to sexuality and reproduction would exploit and intensify the possibilities presented by recent biomedical

developments and social changes, likewise the religion's social and political values affirm contemporary trends, namely global industrial and technological development. The Eloha Yahweh not only advocates universal automation of the means of production, but also criticizes organized labor's resistance to it.⁵⁶ As remarked above, the social system that would manifest humankind's moral maturity is that of a one-world, geniocentric government, having one global currency and one global language, a vision consistent, in part, with recent world economic trends, e.g., the formation of the European Economic Union and its adoption of the Euro. Already in Raël's second book, the Eloha Yahweh says, "Once the European military is unified, so can the European economy be by creating a single European currency."⁵⁷ However, where recent history has proven amenable to the Raëlian valorization of development, it has been less so in regards to geniocentricity. Despite writing a book-length manifesto and the subsequent founding of a short-lived political party, Raël writes in *Let's Welcome Our Fathers from Space* that a

political ideology does not weigh very much when compared to the Messages of the Elohim. . . . The priority of priorities is the building of the Embassy asked for by our Creators so that we can welcome them in the company of the ancient Messengers, Moses, Jesus, Buddha and Mohammed. This is my only reason for being on this Earth. This must become the only reason for living of all those people who wish to help me.⁵⁸

The belief that the relative intelligence of a citizen is unproblematically determinable through "scientific" testing again highlights the religion's faith in the absolute truth available to the scientific method. Perhaps not unsurprisingly, the Raëlian religion's political ideology has not escaped criticism, particularly in Europe. Because of its overtly elitist dimensions, geniocentricity was denounced as "fascist" by the Guyard Report on Sects in France. In its own defense, the Raëlian religion explicitly argues that it is neither a cult nor a sect.⁵⁹ Furthermore, in more recent articulations of its politics, the Raëlian religion has emphasized tolerance and human rights. That all religions ultimately spring from pretechnological humanity's misinterpretations of supertechnological phenomena is offered as grounds for religious, cultural, and racial pluralism.⁶⁰ Indeed, the Raëlian religion has gone as far as to post the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights on its website, stating that the Declaration

is the text written by Man which applies the best to the Message transmitted by the Elohim. This charter which is already contained in the Message, invites the individual to adopt a panoramic, non-sectarian, and non-fanatic vision of our world. It brings him/her to naturally respect and better yet, to love each other's differences.⁶¹

The utopia to be brought about by the technological developments and social values the Raélians so affirm is portrayed most concretely in Raël's description of his visit to the Elohim's planet of the eternal. The lifestyle on the Elohim's planet and in the Golden Age promised by technology is characterized as one of material ease due to sufficient means of production supplied by automated mechanical means and a workforce of "biological robots," artificial human beings identical to ourselves in every way except their intellect, which is designed solely for a single practical purpose. Automation and mechanization are explicitly advocated by the Eloha Yahweh; he explains to Raël that

[y]ou could very soon live in a genuine terrestrial paradise if only the technology which you have was actually put into service for the well-being of people instead of serving violence, the army, or the personal profit of a few. Science and technology can totally liberate humanity not only from the anxiety of hunger in the world, but also from the obligation to work to live. Thanks to automation machines can quite easily look after the daily chores. Already, in some of your most modern factories, only one person is needed now to simply oversee a computer which commands and carries out all the operations for the building of a car for which not so long ago several hundred people were needed. In the future, even that one person will be unnecessary.¹⁰²

The "biological robots" who comprise the labor force of this "terrestrial paradise" are

created in the same way we [the Elohim] created people on Earth, in a one hundred percent scientific way, but they are voluntarily limited and absolutely submissive to us. They are also incapable of acting without any order, and are very specialized. They don't have any aspirations of their own, and have no pleasure, except the ones that their specialization requires. They grow old and die like us but the machine which makes them can make far more than we really need. Besides, they are incapable of suffering, of feelings and cannot reproduce themselves. Their life span is similar to ours, that is to say, with the help of a small surgical intervention, about seven hundred years. When one of them must be destroyed because of old age, the machine which created them produces one or several others depending on our needs. They come out of the machine ready for functioning and with their normal height for they have neither growth nor childhood. They know how to do only one thing, to obey people and Elohim and are incapable of the slightest violence.¹⁰³

One is reminded of the eugenic social engineering in Huxley's *Brave New World*, where artificially inseminated ova are altered *in utero* to the minimal physical and mental demands of their future careers. This life of ease, security, and pleasure (by means of plentiful and readily-available sex "robots") can be enjoyed endlessly, by means of immortality through cloning.

Despite the intense value Raélians place on science and technology, their belief that all life is synthetic inspires an admiration and respect

for living organisms. The variety of plant and animal life on earth is attributed to the artistic faculties of the Elohim biotechnologists. The beauty and variety of nature is held forth not only for appreciation, but also as further evidence against evolution:

You yourself could have realized that an accidental evolution would have little chance of producing such a large variety of forms of life, of colors of birds and their amorous demonstrations, of the shape of the horns of certain antelope . . . The evolution of the forms of life on Earth is the evolution of the techniques of creation and the sophistication of the brilliant work realized by the creators which led eventually to the creation of people similar to them ⁶¹

In fact, the Raëlian Genesis states that teams of scientists held competitions over whose creations were most beautiful. Each race is said to have been the creation of one particular team, each in one location on earth's protocontinent, Gondwanaland. Accordingly, the Raelians have cultivated an appreciation for the beauty of nature; the awe they express over nature's wonders, in their videos and other media, is however not that of the Romantic before the Sublime, but that of an appreciator of an artist's abilities. As Raël writes: "Respect nature for as long as you are not capable of recreating it, and for as long as you are not capable of becoming a creator yourself. By respecting nature, you respect those who created it, our parents, the Elohim."⁶² Interestingly, this conception of organic life as an artificial creation grounds an empathy for all organisms, vegetable and animal, while not leading to the extremes of biocentricism. As Rael writes:

Never make animals suffer. You may kill them to feed on their flesh but without making them suffer. For although death is nothing, suffering is an abomination and you must avoid animals suffering as you must prevent human beings from suffering . . . Plants, too, are alive and suffer in the same way as you do. So do not cause plants to suffer. They are alive just as you are ⁶³

This approach to nature and the advocacy of the use of reproductive technology are the religion's primary points of engagement with ecological concerns.

CONCLUSION

The thorough-going centrality of "science" for the Raëlian worldview is the feature of the Raelian religion that most marks it as the kind of NRM characterized and argued for in this study. The Raëlian "demythologization" of the Bible is simultaneously a mythologization or mystification of science. Indeed, Rael echoes Sir Oliver Lodge: "Science should be your religion for the Elohim your creators created

you scientifically.”⁶⁷ Not only should science replace religion, but being scientific is claimed to be the very essence of human being; as the Eloha Yahweh says during Raël’s first encounter: “Humanity’s objective is scientific progress.”⁶⁸ Scientific progress is the objective not only of humanity, but of all intelligent, humanoid races. Though the Elohim cannot travel in time or foresee the future, they explain that just as the life cycle of a biological organism can be studied, known, and predicted, the same is true for the technological and moral development of any society of intelligent beings.⁶⁹ Within this Raëlian view, technological societies experience either a harmony or disharmony of technological and moral development. In the latter case, the society self-destructs, as our own threatens to do. However, should the society mature morally, its use of technology results in a Golden Age where the problems development and industrialization engender, such as pollution, overpopulation, hunger, and the energy crisis, are themselves solved by “the wise use of science.” This ideologization of science and technology (hardly restricted to the Raëlian religion) grounds the sense of the claim that the Elohim are “25,000 years ahead” of humanity’s present scientific and technological development. Science and technology are repeatedly characterized as a natural pursuit of intelligent beings. In this way, a social and cultural phenomenon is portrayed as if it were natural, necessary, uniform, and universal, i.e., the phenomenon is ideologized.

Despite being primarily a transformation of the Bible, Raëlianism appears more immediately relevant to our most urgent concerns. While religions originating before the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions have sought ways to accommodate to a changing environment and to answer new concerns, the Raëlian Religion might be said to be inspired precisely by the selfsame issues which characterize the present moment in world history. The Raëlian view, then, affirms existing, traditional theological structures (e.g., the narrative of Genesis), while performing a kind of Hegelian *Aufhebung* (sublation) identical in its logic to that performed on the notion of technology itself by the class of NRMs here studied.

In summary, the advent of the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions usher in today’s dominant discourse and practices within which religions, orthodox and otherwise, must define themselves. The present stands within the horizon of the death of God, understood as the domination of the assumption of the immanence of the world and the consequent disappearance of the metaphysical, the supernatural, and the supersensuous (at least overtly) or their fall into the merely paranormal. The paranormal or parapsychical is that realm of nature yet to be understood (and so ultimately controlled) by science. This assumption that science will continue along the path of discovery, knowledge, and power naturalizes or ideologizes science and technology. When our

science and technology poison the biosphere, split the atom to release potentially species-suicidal energies and manipulate the genetic code of living organisms, humanity has taken upon itself powers and potentialities hitherto exclusively the domain of superhuman deities. That science and technology, whose worldview determines how things are, bring us to an unprecedented impasse demands they must in some way be transcended (i.e., survived). The flying saucer appears within this horizon as a symbol of just such transcendence, promising that precisely the causes of our quandary will be our means of salvation.

ENDNOTES

¹ <<http://www.rael.net/web/amouv.html>>, accessed 23 June 1999.

² Roy Wallis, *The Elementary Forms of the New Religious Life* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984).

³ Robert S. Ellwood, *Religious and Spiritual Groups in America* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 334.

⁴ <<http://www.rael.net/web/amouv.html>>, accessed 23 June 1999.

⁵ C. G. Jung, *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*, trans. R. F. C. Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 5.

⁶ Jung, 135.

⁷ Aho's analysis of the postmodern condition is both more sociologically oriented and pointed than Lyotard's now-classic presentation though certainly consistent with the latter's basic thesis. See James A. Aho, "The Apocalypse of Modernity," in *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem*, ed. Thomas Robbins and Susan J. Palmer (New York: Routledge, 1997), 61-72; J.-F. Lyotard, "The Postmodern Condition," trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, in *Philosophy: End or Transformation?*, ed. Kenneth Baynes, et. al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987). Likewise, Heidegger's characterization of the metanarrative as placeholder for God is both relatively early and germane. See Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977), 64:

Into the position of the vanished authority of God and of the teaching office of the Church steps the authority of conscience, obtrudes the authority of reason. Against these the social instinct rises up. The flight from the world into the suprasensory is replaced by historical progress. The otherworldly goal of everlasting bliss is transformed into the earthly happiness of the greatest number. The careful maintenance of the cult of religion is relaxed through enthusiasm for the creating of a culture or the spreading of civilization. Creativity, previously the unique property of the biblical god, becomes the distinctive mark of human activity. Human creativity finally passes over into business enterprise.

⁸ The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer succinctly articulates this version in *Reason in the Age of Science*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 103-4:

Self-understanding can no longer be integrally related to a complete self-transparency in the sense of a full self-presence of ourselves to ourselves. Self-understanding is always on-the-way; it is on a path whose completion is a clear impossibility. If there is an entire dimension of unilluminated unconscious; if all our actions, wishes, drives, decisions, and models of conduct (and so the totality of our human social existence) are based on the obscure and veiled dimension of the connotations of our animality, if all our conscious representations can be masks, pretexts, under which our vital energy or our social interests pursue their own goals in an unconscious way; if all the insights we have, as obvious and

self-evident as they may be, are threatened by such doubt; then self-understanding cannot designate patent self-transparency of our human existence. We have to repudiate the illusion of completely illuminating the darkness of our motivations and tendencies.

⁹ Heidegger, 54-55.

¹⁰ Sir Oliver Lodge, *The Survival of Man* (London: Methuen, 1909).

¹¹ J. Gordon Melton, "The Contactees: A Survey," in *The Gods Have Landed: New Religions from Other Worlds*, ed. James R. Lewis (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 4.

¹² John A. Saliba, "Religious Dimensions of UFO Phenomena," in Lewis, *The Gods Have Landed*, 35.

¹³ Roy Wallis, "The Aetherius Society: A Case Study in the Formation of a Mystagogic Congregation," *Sociological Review* 22 (1974): 27-44.

¹⁴ Diana Tumminia, "How Prophecy Never Fails: Interpretive Reason in a Flying Saucer Group," *Sociology of Religion* 59, no. 2 (1998): 157-70.

¹⁵ Robert W. Balch, "Waiting for the Ships: Disillusionment and the Revitalization of Faith in Bo and Peep's UFO Cult," in Lewis, *The Gods Have Landed*, 137-66.

¹⁶ Saliba, 34.

¹⁷ Von Däniken's relevant books in German are *Erinnerungen in der Zukunft* (Germany: Econ Verlag, 1968) and *Zurück an den Sternen* (Germany: Econ Verlag, 1968), translated respectively as *Chariots of the Gods*, trans. Michael Heron (New York: Putnam, 1970) and *Gods from Outer Space*, trans. Michael Heron (New York: Putnam, 1971). The English-language books remarked are W. Raymond Drake, *Gods and Spacemen in the Ancient East* (London: Sphere, 1968) and Otto Binder, *Unsolved Mysteries of the Past* (New York: Tower, 1968). In French, see Jean Sendy, *La lune: Clé de la Bible* (France: Editions René Juillard, 1968); translated as *The Moon: Outpost of the Gods*, trans. Lowell Blair (New York: Berkeley Medallion, 1975). Sendy's other relevant books are *Those Gods Who Made Heaven and Earth*, trans. Lowell Blair (New York: Berkeley Medallion, 1972) and *The Coming of the Gods*, trans. Lowell Blair (New York: Berkeley Medallion, 1973), both published in French by Robert Lafront (Paris) 1969 and 1970 respectively. See also Jacques Bergier, *Les Extra-Terrestres dans l'Histoire* (Paris: Editions J'ai Lu, 1970), translated as *Extraterrestrial Visitations from Prehistoric Times to the Present*, trans. Henry Regnery Company (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1973); and Serge Hutin, *Alien Races and Fantastic Civilizations* (New York: Berkeley Medallion, 1975), published in French by Editions J'ai Lu in 1970.

¹⁸ Raël's first book in translation is the first half of Claude Vorilhon ("Raël"), *The Message Given to Me by Extra-terrestrials: They Took Me to Their Planet* (Tokyo: AOM Corporation, 1986).

¹⁹ Vorilhon, *Message*, 14.

²⁰ Vorilhon, *Message*, 20-30.

²¹ <<http://www.rael.net/web/ascience5.html>>, accessed 24 June 1999.

²² Vorilhon, *Message*, 105-6.

²³ Vorilhon, *Message*, 109.

²⁴ Vorilhon, *Message*, 113.

²⁵ Vorilhon, *Message*, 111.

²⁶ Vorilhon, *Message*, 114.

²⁷ Vorilhon, *Message*, 115-17.

²⁸ Vorilhon, *Message*.

²⁹ Vorilhon, *Message*, 197.

³⁰ Vorilhon, *Message*, 205.

³¹ Vorilhon, *Message*, 198.

³² Vorilhon, *Message*, 206-8.

³³ Vorilhon, *Message*, 215.

- ¹⁴ Claude Vorilhon ("Raël"), *La Genioratie* (Brantome: l'Édition du Message, 1977).
- ¹⁵ Claude Vorilhon ("Raël"), *Sensual Meditation* (Tokyo: AOM Corporation, 1986).
- ¹⁶ Claude Vorilhon ("Raël"), *Let's Welcome our Fathers from Space: They Created Humanity in Their Laboratories* (Tokyo: AOM Corporation, 1986).
- ¹⁷ Susan Palmer, "The Raëlian Movement International" in *New Religions and the New Europe*, ed. Robert Towler (Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 1995), 194-210.
- ¹⁸ <<http://www.netside.net/~valiant/PRO61499.html>>, accessed 23 June 1999.
- ¹⁹ Vorilhon, *Let's Welcome our Fathers from Space*, 52.
- ²⁰ Vorilhon, *Let's Welcome our Fathers from Space*, 52.
- ²¹ Vorilhon, *Message*, 90.
- ²² Vorilhon, *Let's Welcome our Fathers from Space*, 53.
- ²³ Vorilhon, *Let's Welcome our Fathers from Space*, 88.
- ²⁴ Vorilhon, *Let's Welcome our Fathers from Space*, 29-30.
- ²⁵ Vorilhon, *Let's Welcome our Fathers from Space*, 74.
- ²⁶ Vorilhon, *Message*, 124.
- ²⁷ Vorilhon, *Let's Welcome our Fathers from Space*, 31.
- ²⁸ <<http://www.rael.net/web/genetics.html>>, accessed 24 June 1999.
- ²⁹ <<http://www.rael.net/aclone.html>>, accessed 23 June 1999.
- ³⁰ Personal communication from Dr. Bridgette Boisellier.
- ³¹ Vorilhon, *Let's Welcome our Fathers from Space*, 61.
- ³² Vorilhon, *Message*, 121.
- ³³ Vorilhon, *Let's Welcome our Fathers from Space*, 86.
- ³⁴ Vorilhon, *Let's Welcome our Fathers from Space*, 61-70.
- ³⁵ Vorilhon, *Message*, 263.
- ³⁶ Vorilhon, *Message*, 190.
- ³⁷ Vorilhon, *Message*, 184.
- ³⁸ Vorilhon, *Let's Welcome our Fathers from Space*, 51.
- ³⁹ <<http://www.rael.net/web/amouv.html>>, accessed 23 June 1999.
- ⁴⁰ <<http://www.rael.net/web/avaleur1.html>>, accessed 24 June 1999.
- ⁴¹ <<http://www.rael.net/web/avaleur1.html>>, accessed 24 June 1999.
- ⁴² Vorilhon, *Message*, 190.
- ⁴³ Vorilhon, *Message*, 198.
- ⁴⁴ Vorilhon, *Message*, 103-4.
- ⁴⁵ Vorilhon, *Message*, 244.
- ⁴⁶ Vorilhon, *Message*, 244.
- ⁴⁷ Vorilhon, *Message*, 255.
- ⁴⁸ Vorilhon, *Message*, 27.
- ⁴⁹ Vorilhon, *Let's Welcome our Fathers from Space*, 118.



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