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DESCENDING MASTERS: A HISTORY OF THE RAËLIAN MOVEMENT

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SYNOPSIS

UFO fascination has been around for centuries, and events that many have said portend the end of civilization — such as wars and natural catastrophes — frequently fuel it. Moreover, religious beliefs and UFO interest have always walked hand in hand, often interpreting each other.

A relatively new religious movement birthed by a supposed UFO encounter is the Raëlian Movement, a.k.a. Raëlian Religion. The Raëlians made national headlines when an affiliated scientist announced that Clonaid, a company developed by Claude Vorilhon Raël, the movement's founder, was attempting to clone the first human being by December 2001.

Raël himself claims that his religion is science, but a careful analysis of his movement indicates that it is a science wrapped in reinterpretations of primary biblical doctrines. Cloning, in fact, is the ultimate eschatological experiment: "Eternal life, thanks to science" is the Raëlian motto.

In the earlier years of UFO study, cult figures and founders liberally borrowed from occult literature; for example, the Theosophical teaching of the "ascended masters." The Raëlians also have their masters, a group of technologically advanced Beings, who descended to earth in spaceships, creating all of life on this planet some 25,000 years ago.

As I looked, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north, and a great cloud, with brightness round about it, and fire flashing forth continually, and in the midst of the fire, as it were gleaming bronze. And from the midst of it came the likeness of four living creatures....Now as I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel upon the earth beside the living creatures, one for each of the four of them. As for the appearance of the wheels and their construction: their appearance was like the gleaming of a chrysolite....And when the living creatures went, the wheels went beside them; and when the living creatures rose from the earth, the wheels rose. (Ezek. 1:4-5, 15-16, 19; RSV)

When Ezekiel saw these other-worldly wheels and creatures up in the middle of a sixth-century B.C. sky, it's likely he never imagined they would become corroborating evidence for the existence of flying saucers and extraterrestrial life.

The current interest in other worlds actually dates back to 24 June 1947 when Kenneth Arnold, a civilian pilot, reported seeing shiny objects flying in saucerlike fashion in front of his airplane near Mount

Rainier, Washington. Coinage of the term “flying saucer” quickly followed, fueled by reports of similar sightings.¹ Capitalizing on postwar fears, George Adamski’s books, published in the 1950s, included alleged conversations in the California desert with Orthon, a humanlike being from Venus. Literary support for the Venusian message drew heavily on occult references, including the Theosophical writings of Madame H. P. Blavatsky.²

Extraterrestrial fascination, however, predates the twentieth century. In 1758, Swedish scientist Emanuel Swedenborg detailed his own interplanetary trips. His related spiritual teachings were decidedly at variance with those of orthodox Christianity.³ A long line of other mystics followed in the late 1800s, including French medium Helene Smith. She recounted her trip to Mars and even developed a Martian language (similar to French). Polish-born American Thomas Blot purportedly entertained a Martian in his home.⁴

It was after Adamski, however, that UFO sightings markedly increased, as did tales of alien encounters and abductions. Also on the increase were new religious movements with their own unique UFOlogies. One of these, the International Raëlian Movement (a.k.a. Raëlian Religion), has recently attracted worldwide attention, not because of its allegedly otherworldly origins, but because of its open attempt to clone the world’s first human being.⁵ That effort can be best understood and evaluated by taking a closer look at the movement as a whole.

RAËLIAN BEGINNING

The founder of the Raëlian Movement is Claude Vorilhon (b. 1946), a former French racecar driver, sports magazine editor, and resident of Quebec, Canada, headquarters for the movement.⁶ On 13 December 1973, Vorilhon allegedly encountered a saucer-shaped UFO hovering over an extinct volcano near Clermont-Ferrand, France. He described the occupant that emerged as a pale green humanlike being, approximately four feet tall with black hair, a beard, and almond-shaped eyes.⁷ The tiny extraterrestrial informed Vorilhon about the true origins of humankind and gave him a new name: Raël, meaning “light of God” or “ambassador.” He commissioned Raël to spread his “Messages” throughout the world, a duty befitting Raël as the “last of the forty prophets.” According to “The New Commandments,” Raël is also the “shepherd of shepherds,” and “the one whose coming was announced in all the religions by the ancient prophets.”⁸

Raël has taken his prophetic calling seriously. Two of his books have been translated into 25 languages; he claims over a million copies have sold.⁹ The content mainly consists of reinterpretations of major biblical doctrines, all with an extraterrestrial spin. Familiar Old and New Testament narratives are supposedly demystified in Raël’s writings, and then scientized. The Genesis Flood, for example, was allegedly caused by exploding nuclear missiles. Noah’s Ark was a spacecraft “lifted above the Earth” (Gen. 7:17).¹⁰ The Tower of Babel was a rocket, designed for the conquest of space.¹¹ The crossing of the Red Sea was made possible by a repulsion beam parting the waters.¹² Ezekiel’s creatures were wearing antigravity suits with small jet engines attached for directional purposes.¹³ The healing miracles of Jesus were performed at a distance with concentrated laserlike beams.¹⁴

The official Raëlian Web page contains the disclaimer: “We are not ufologists.”¹⁵ UFOland, the movement’s elaborate theme park near Montreal, makes this a questionable claim. In one sense, however, UFOs are peripheral to the message of Raël’s UFO messenger.

DOCTRINES OF GOD, CREATION, AND THE NATURE OF HUMAN BEINGS

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According to the Raëlian interpretation, humans were created, not by divine fiat or the random process of evolution, but intentionally and scientifically by Beings known as the Elohim, or “those who came from the sky.” Raël claims the original Hebrew word “Elohim” has been wrongly translated as “God” (singular). There is, claims Raël, no personal creator God, but there is a plurality of Elohim Creators, also known as “the fathers.”¹⁶

The means by which the Elohim created humans lends new meaning to the twenty-first-century argument of intelligent design. According to Raëlian reinterpretations of Genesis 1–3, the Elohim are technologically advanced Beings from another solar system. In fact, they created all life forms in laboratories about 25,000 years ago in what is now Israel from the synthesis of chemicals and their own imported DNA while drawing on their superior knowledge of genetics and cell biology. Humans were created in the image of the Elohim, who themselves were created by an even more technologically advanced society.¹⁷

Raëlian cosmology even has an extraterrestrial version of the Fall of Adam. Humans were to live in ignorance of their scientific origins, but they developed an aggressive streak and were expelled from their Edenic laboratory. According to Raël, the cherubim guarding the garden entrance with flaming sword (Gen. 3:24) were soldiers with atomic disintegration weapons, preventing humans from stealing scientific knowledge and becoming intellectually equal to their creators.¹⁸ Ever since their eviction, the primary task for human beings has been to raise their level of collective interplanetary consciousness to the point where they are scientifically and politically mature and technically ready for an earthly reencounter with the Elohim.¹⁹

WHO IS JESUS CHRIST?

Jesus plays a role in Raëlian cosmology as the 38th prophet, followed by Joseph Smith of Mormon fame. Jesus was a product of Mary’s artificial insemination by the president of the Council of the Eternals, that is, Yahweh, the chief Eloha. Raël was similarly born of the union between a human mother and Yahweh, making him half-brother to Jesus. Raël justifies this interbreeding with reinterpretations of Genesis 6:1–4, noting the Elohim had normal carnal desires and passions. The Jews today are supposedly descendants of these couplings.²⁰ The Raëlians also have a scientific explanation for the resurrection of Jesus. It was, they say, a “resuscitation” and type of cloning, performed by the Elohim using a single cell preserved prior to Jesus’ crucifixion.²¹

ESCHATOLOGY AND LIFE AFTER DEATH

Most UFO cults place great stress on end-of-the-world scenarios. The Raëlians are no exception. Unlike many UFO cults, however, Raëlians see no immediate need for an otherworldly escape plan. Raël teaches we are now living in the “Age of Apocalypse,” a Messianic age of revelation ushered in by the Hiroshima bombing, the creation of the United Nations (a unified planetary body), and the establishment of the state of Israel.²² There is a related Raëlian teaching that humanity may someday destroy itself; nonetheless, the future is more bright than bleak if you’re a Raëlian.²³ What is now coming to an end is the world and the work of the church. Raël’s understanding of church, however, is quite limited and primarily equated with Catholicism.²⁴ He decries the wealth of the Vatican and calls for an end to “stupid rules,” “meatless Fridays,” and people “who want to make us believe in original sin and who want to make us feel guilty.” Raël also urges an end of belief in such entities as guardian angels, the devil, and an omniscient, omnipotent “Heavenly God.”²⁵ Raëlians anticipate the Elohim will return to earth to officially sanction Raëlianism as the dominant world religion and, if necessary, take followers of the religion to their own planet. A primary goal of the movement is to build an embassy in Israel to welcome the foreign

delegation of the Elohim.²⁶ If Raëlians die prior to this event, eternal life can be experienced on the planet of the Elohim, provided their earthly balance sheet tallied up more positives than negatives on a universal computer. It is also essential that a piece of forehead bone be sent to the Guide of Guides after death for a person's eventual recreation through the mechanism of cloning.²⁷ If people's negatives outweigh their positives or they don't provide for bone retrieval, Raël insists they shouldn't worry. Death, after all, is nothing to be feared; it's just an endless sleep. If the "terrible event" of suffering (either physical or mental) should accompany the dying process, suicide is recommended. Raël also notes that euthanasia should be offered to those whose suffering "remains incurable."²⁸

CLONAIID

The road to eternal life on earth, according to Raëlian doctrine, is paved with DNA, and cloning is the key to immortality. Raël teaches there is no such thing as an individual human soul, but each person has a genetic code capable of technological reincarnation.²⁹ Ethical implications related to Raëlian teachings, specifically their claim to be able to clone a human being, have recently thrust the movement into both public and scientific arenas. In 1997, Raël and a group of investors created Valiant Ventures, Ltd. (now known as Clonaid) from an offshore biotechnology company located in the Bahamas.³⁰ Clonaid's director is Brigitte Boisselier, a Raëlian Guide, who holds a Ph.D. in physical and analytic chemistry. Until April 2001, Boisselier was also a visiting assistant professor at Hamilton College in Clinton, New York. She is now Supervisor of Raëlian Scientific Projects.³¹ Raël claims 10,000 people are expected to avail themselves of Clonaid's services in the future. Beneficiaries will be couples with fertility problems, couples who have lost a child, couples who want to preserve samples of a living child's cells for future cloning should that child die, and homosexual couples desiring to have a child who would be a genetic replica of one of the partners. For \$50,000, human cells can be sampled and stored through a service called Insuraclone.³² Some have dismissed the Raëlians as a fringe movement whose promise to clone may not translate into the ability to actually do so,³³ but the movement's claims cannot be so easily dismissed. Raël and Boisselier both testified on human cloning before the U.S. Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations on 28 March 2001.³⁴ The Raëlian entry into the cloning race has raised one primary issue: the need for some form of government regulation in the private sector. The subcommittee hearing was hailed in some corners as being a major step in government efforts to totally ban any and all attempts at human cloning.³⁵ Prior to the hearing, the FDA had sent a letter to Clonaid, warning that the company would be violating federal regulations if human cloning experiments proceeded without government approval.³⁶ Boisselier vowed they would clone anyway; if not in the United States, then in some other country where regulations are more lax. She strongly implied that the first stage of cloning had already been completed.³⁷ The first to be cloned by Boisselier's team was to be a 10-month-old child, who died unexpectedly during a surgical procedure. Funding for Clonaid's first experimental year (\$500,000) comes from money the child's parents received from a malpractice settlement with the hospital. \$200,000 is the going rate for future clones.³⁸ A cloned human infant is just one elementary step for the Raëlians in a larger program of genetic engineering that bears resemblance to "transhumanism," a movement afoot particularly in the halls of science and academia (see sidebar). The Raëlians' primary goal is the direct cloning of older humans with the transfer of memories and personality into new and more youthful bodies in the ultimate eschatological experiment.³⁹

RELIGIOUS STATUS AND GROWTH

The government of Quebec has granted religious corporation and tax free status to the Raëlian Church, a curious ruling for a movement that claims to be atheistic.⁴⁰ According to Raëlian teaching, there is no god but science.⁴¹ There is much conceptual fuzziness, however, with respect to their doctrine of the existence and nature of divinity. Raël has written that those religions are correct that understand God to be a concept without identity.⁴² The Raëlian worldview is similar to classical Hinduism in that it is basically monistic: humans are believed to be part of the omnipresent, eternal, impersonal Infinity, where

everything and everyone is “linked.” Like Buddhism, however, Raël teaches that there is no such thing as a soul. After death “there is nothing”; one’s personal energy simply blends with all the other energies of the universe. Raélians reject traditional beliefs in karma and reincarnation, though cloning itself may be a form of genetic reincarnation for those who find the notion dismaying that one’s personal life really amounts to a sum zero with a dispersion of one’s constituent atoms at death. In Raëlianism, “material spirituality” substitutes “god and goddesses” with an awareness of “the unity of mind and matter.”⁴³ There is even more conceptual fuzziness with respect to the nature of the Elohim, who appear to have many godlike capabilities, though Raël insists they are merely an intellectually superior form of humanity.⁴⁴

In most areas, Raélians play fast and loose with Scripture, but they lean toward biblical literalism in the area of economics: tithing is one of the five Raëlian commandments. At least one percent of a person’s net annual income is to be given directly to the Guide of Guides of the movement (currently Raël) in order to spread the Elohim message and support his family. When the embassy is built (with servants and a swimming pool), it will become the new family residence. The only inheritance people are to leave their children is their family dwelling; everything else is to be legally willed to the Guide of Guides or, if the possibility exists that a family member might contest the will, given over to the Guide of Guides before the person’s death.⁴⁵

The Raëlian movement has grown considerably since 1973, and its numbers show no signs of dwindling. According to Raëlian statistics, there are 55,000 converts in 84 countries with Canada (Quebec), France, and Japan leading the world in membership.⁴⁶

RAËLIAN SEXUALITY

Sociologist Susan Palmer has written that the movement “appears to be one of the rare examples of a new religious movement (NRM) which promotes in its members a tolerance for sexual ambiguity and encourages homosexual expression.”⁴⁷ She notes that experimental and individualistic approaches to redefining sexuality abound and, in fact, may be one of the reasons for the movement’s growth, particularly in French-speaking and predominantly Catholic Quebec.⁴⁸ Although 85 percent of the people of Quebec are Catholic, only 15 percent attend church with any regularity, and spirituality has turned to the “flaky and esoteric,” with 800 sects and religions in Montreal alone.⁴⁹ Cloning may be the issue that has brought the movement national notoriety, but it appears to be the encouragement of multiple forms of sexual expression that is a primary drawing card for those seeking spiritually sanctioned sexual adventures.

THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE

According to a Reuters News Service report, masturbation and communal orgasm as well as sexual freedom and pleasure are foundational behaviors and attitudes encouraged by the Raëlian religion.⁵⁰ In fact, they are taught the techniques of “sensual meditation” in annual worldwide Awakening Seminars.⁵¹ The aim is to decondition and uninhibit the self and broaden tastes and ways of thinking, maximizing the body’s ability to experience pleasure “without the paralysis of society’s guilt.” According to Raël, we are “born for pleasure.”⁵² Raël claims the Elohim recommend freedom of choice with respect to sexual tastes or experiences, including homosexual and bisexual partners. Marriage is discouraged and considered “useless.” The key to societal transformation is personal development of sensuality.⁵³ Sensual education is also advocated for children. Parents are encouraged to awaken children’s minds by awakening their bodies. The thrust of this education appears to be teaching children to use their sexual organs for pleasurable rather than utilitarian purposes.⁵⁴ The Raélians’ distribution of 10,000 condoms to students at a high school in Montreal in 1992 prompted considerable commentary by the press.⁵⁵

PHILOSOPHER-KINGS OR MASTER RACE?

Sexuality is not the only aspect of the Raëlian Movement that is controversial. In July 1991, the Montreal Gazette noted that the French government had conducted a "series of raids" on homes owned by Raëlians. Shortly thereafter, Raël left France.⁵⁶ Suspicions focused on the Raëlian teaching of "geniocracy," a political system reminiscent of Plato's "Republic," where only geniuses (people with an intellectual capacity at least 50 percent above average) govern the country.⁵⁷ A one-world humanitarian government that rents land to its tenants is also advocated along with a new worldwide currency and a new universal language.⁵⁸ The ghost of Hitler's master race was also evoked in the choice of the official symbol for the Raëlian Movement, the Star of David with a Swastika in its center, the latter considered by the Raëlians to be an image of the infinity of space and time and the emblem of the Elohim. In 1992, Raël publicly apologized to the Jews for insensitivity to the holocaust and revised the emblem, substituting a swirling galaxy for the Swastika. This appeared to be a strategic move, given the desire to secure a plot of land in Israel to establish their embassy.⁵⁹

THE FUTURE OF THE RAËLIAN MOVEMENT

What the future holds for the Raëlian Movement is unclear. New regulations and legal action may well stop their effort at cloning in its tracks.

In any case, the charismatic leadership of Raël and the appeal of the movement to both sensuality and science may well continue to draw yet another generation seeking a life of ecstasy, courtesy of sensual meditation, or life eternal, courtesy of science and technology. According to the Raëlians, the Elohim have landed, and offer both.

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NOTES

1 Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World* (New York: Random House, 1995), 70–71.

2 Robert S. Ellwood, "Spiritualism and UFO Religion in New Zealand: The International Transmission of Modern Spiritual Movements," in James R. Lewis, ed., *The Gods Have Landed: New Religions from Other Worlds* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 167-86. See also George Adamski, *Inside the Space Ships* (New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1955), and George Adamski and Desmond Leslie, *Flying Saucers Have Landed* (London: Werner Laurie, 1953).

3 Emanuel Swedenborg, *Earths in Our Solar System* (Boston: B. A. Whittemore, n.d.).

4 See J. Gordon Melton, "The Contactees: A Survey," in *The Gods Have Landed*, 1–13.

5 Raël, *Yes to Human Cloning: Eternal Life Thanks to Science*, trans. Dr. Marcus Wenner (n.p.: The Raëlian Foundation, 2001).

6 Raël, *The True Face of God* (n.p.: The Raëlian Religion, 1998). (Note: *The True Face of God* is a compilation and revision of two other books, previously published in French under the name of Claude Vorillhon. Book One is *The Book Which Tells the Truth* [1974], 11–110. Book Two is *Extra-Terrestrials Took Me to Their Planet* [1976], 111–205).

7 Ibid., 13–14.

8 Ibid., 17, 84, 162.

9 Ibid., 206.

10 Ibid., 25–27.

11 Ibid., 28–29.

12 Ibid., 32.

13 Ibid., 46.

- 14 Ibid., 62.
- 15 See www.rael.org.
- 16 Claude Vorilhon Raël, *Let's Welcome Our Fathers from Space: They Created Humanity in Their Laboratories* (Tokyo: AOM Corporation, 1986), 1–3. Trans. from the French: *Accueillir Les Extra-Terrestres* (n.p.: Fondation Raélienne, 1979).
- 17 Ibid. See also <http://www.rael.org/int/english/summary/summary.html>.
- 18 Raël, *Let's Welcome Our Fathers*, 3. See also Raël, *The True Face of God*, 25–27.
- 19 Raël, *Let's Welcome Our Fathers*, 136.
- 20 Ibid., 3–4. See also Raël, *The True Face of God*, 26 and Raël, *Let's Welcome Our Fathers*, 113–16.
- 21 Raël, *The True Face of God*, 152.
- 22 Raël, *Let's Welcome Our Fathers*, 117–37; Raël, *The True Face of God*, 75–76. See also Tages-Anzeiger, “UFO Sect Calls for Suicide,” *German Scientology News*, 19 June 1999. This reporter believes Raël has suicidal tendencies and advocates suicide to his followers.
- 23 Raël, *Let's Welcome Our Fathers*, 125–36.
- 24 Vorilhon acknowledged his worldly father was Jewish and his mother was Catholic. See Raël, *The Face of God*, 72.
- 25 Ibid., 72–75, 77–78.
- 26 Ibid., 160. See also <http://www.rael.org/int/english/index.html>.
- 27 Ibid., 176.
- 28 Raël, *Yes to Human Cloning*, 44–45; Raël, *Let's Welcome Our Fathers*, 89–90; Raël, *The True Face of God*, 177.
- 29 Raël, *Let's Welcome Our Fathers*, 44.
- 30 Raël, *Yes to Human Cloning*, 87–88. See also www.clonaid.com.
- 31 Ibid., 89. See also Jeane MacIntosh, “Upstate Prof Quits to Clone Humans,” www.nypost.com/news/regionalnews/28091.htm, April 2001.
- 32 Ibid., 37. See also “Raël Creates the First Human Cloning Company,” 10 March 1997 press release (www.rael.org/int/english/press/clonean).
- 33 Bioethicist Arthur Caplan, University of Pennsylvania, stated, “The Raélians are nuts, and I don't think they can do it.” (Quoted in Adam Pasick, “Religious Sect Vows to Honor Alien Forebears by Cloning Humans,” www.foxnews.com/science/101800/clone.sml, 19 October 2000.)
- 34 Rick Weiss, “Scientists Testify on Human Cloning Plans,” *Washington Post*, 29 March 2001.
- 35 See Raël, *Yes to Human Cloning*, 157–60 for a transcript of the testimony. See also “Raélians, Ethicists Face off on Cloning,” *Montreal Gazette*, 29 March 2001.
- 36 MacIntosh., 2. See also Weiss, 2001.
- 37 See Nancy Gibbs, “Baby, It's You! And You, and You...,” *Time*, 11 February 2001, 7 (<http://www.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,98998,00.html>).
- 38 Rick Weiss, “Human Cloning's ‘Numbers Game,’” *Washington Post*, 10 October 2000, sect. A. (washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/health/specials/genetherapy/A39671-2000Oct9.html). See also http://www.rael.org/int/press_site/english/pages/press_releases.html for a February 2002 press release about Clonaid's plans to clone a terminally ill man.
- 39 Raël, *Yes to Human Cloning*, 36–37 and 101–12; Raël, *The True Face of God*, 209.
- 40 See www.rael.org.
- 41 Raël, *Yes to Human Cloning*, 81.
- 42 Raël, *Let's Welcome Our Fathers*, 42–45; Raël, *Yes to Human Cloning*, 82.
- 43 Ibid., 82; *The True Face of God*, 142–44.
- 44 Raël, *Let's Welcome Our Fathers*, 1–5.
- 45 Ibid., 13; Raël, *The True Face of God*, 162–63.
- 46 Raël, *Yes to Human Cloning*, back cover.

47 Susan Jean Palmer, "Women in the Raëlian Movement: New Religious Experiments in Gender and Authority," in *The Gods Have Landed*, 105–35.

48 Ibid.

49 Taras Grescoe, "Raël Love: A Gorgeous Group of Alien Spawn Hones a Hedonistic Hankering for Sex," www.salon.com/travel/feature/2000/03/08/raelians/index/html, 8 March 2000.

50 Reuters News Service, 6 August 1997. Cited by Marty Butz in "Profile: The Raëlian Religion," <http://www.watchman.org/profile/raelianpro.htm>.

51 Claude Vorilhon Raël, *Sensual Meditation: Awakening the Mind by Awakening the Body* (Tokyo: AOM Corporation, 1986).

52 Raël, *Yes to Human Cloning*, 11.

53 Raël, *Let's Welcome Our Fathers*, 64–65; Raël, *The True Face of God*, 175.

54 Ibid., 68, 77–81; Raël, *Sensual Meditation*, 129–30. See also Raël, *The True Face of God*, 170–72.

55 Jan Wong, "Clone Artist," *The Toronto Globe and Mail*, 7 April 2001.

56 *The Montreal Gazette*, 22 July 1991. Cited by Butz.

57 Raël, *The True Face of God*, 85–87.

58 Ibid., 87–93.

59 Ibid., 206–10.