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Is God a Space Alien? The Cosmology of the Raëlian Church

George D. Chryssides

Abstract. The Raëlian Church is an atheistic religion with a cosmology that is compatible with modern science. Its founder-leader Claude Vorilhon (Raël), whose birth in 1946 is said to herald the new Age of Aquarius, offers a detailed interpretation of Judaeo-Christian scripture that claims a history of encounters a new highly evolved technological society, with the possibility of immortality for those who are worthy. Jung's theory that flying saucers are a modern myth is used to demonstrate how Raëlianism finds it possible to synthesize UFOlogy and religion.

Introduction

The UFO-religions are relatively undocumented in academic literature, where the main interest in new religious movements (NRMs) focuses on those that bear a relationship to traditional religions, or else on New Age spirituality. Like most NRMs, however, the UFO religions, not least the Raëlians, purport to offer novel ways of solving pressing questions with which traditional religions find difficulty.

In the case of the UFO religions, the pressing question is how to devise a cosmology that is acceptable in a 'scientific' era. Mainstream Christianity is still trying to emerge, somewhat battered, from an intellectual climate that has emphasized empiricism with its accompanying scientific and technological advance. Ever since Sir Alfred J. Ayer and the philosophers of the Vienna Circle formulated the famous Verification Principle, insisting that any putative statement was literally meaningless unless it could be empirically verified, philosophers of religion have endeavoured to devise ways in which religion might survive the challenge. Following the discoveries of Lyell and Darwin, believers

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and their critics alike have often viewed science as the enemy of religion, either rejecting Darwinism totally in favour of Creationism, or else abandoning religion as ‘unscientific’. The recent phenomenon which some sociologists describe as ‘secularization’ is allegedly a situation in which people’s allegiance has transferred itself from the supernatural to the scientific and the technological: say as we will, we live in a technological world and at a pragmatic level must hold on to a scientific-technological world-view.

It is within this context that the UFO religions must be viewed, for they present a radical way of resolving the question of how the divine and the human are related. In the vast majority of religions, their cosmology posits a natural and a supernatural world, accounting for the former’s origins in terms of the latter, and making sense of the human predicament in terms of an interpretation of history and a final destiny that are to be understood in terms of the supernatural, and in which the physical world serves as an ‘arena of opportunity’.¹

Put this way, any aspersions that are cast on the existence of the supernatural or on metaphysical discourse concerning it must inevitably pose a threat to religious belief. However, suppose it were the case that the gods *are* physical beings, and that traditional religious discourse is a misguided attempt to impose metaphysics on crucially significant *physical* events? A religion without metaphysics would be a ‘scientific’ religion, and one which avoids all the philosophical problems relating to non-empirical verification.

A Brief History of UFology

To understand the Raëlians a brief survey of UFology is needed.² The interest in UFOs is generally traceable to the sighting by Kenneth Arnold on 24 June 1947; he saw a blue-white flash of light in the sky followed by nine strange-looking craft flying at an amazing speed. A further flash was followed by some crescent-shaped discs that skimmed over the mountains at a speed which he calculated to be 1,656 miles an hour — quite impossible for any aircraft designed by humans. Arnold later said to journalists that, ‘They flew like a saucer would if you skipped it across the water’.³ The expression ‘flying saucer’ was born, and Arnold was subjected to considerable ridicule by numerous debunkers and by the public in general. However, in the wake of the Arnold incident some 850 UFO sightings were reported in USA by the end of that year.

Close on the heels of Arnold’s sighting was the famous Roswell incident on 2 July in the same year. A farmer living at Foster Ranch, near

Corona, New Mexico heard an enormous explosion one night and found extremely strange metallic material strewn over a radius of three quarters of a mile. No sooner had word got around about the incident than the Air Force removed the material and claimed that it was the remains of a weather balloon that was being tested. A rumour arose, however, that five bodies had been recovered that did not appear to be human; one was still alive, and was able to communicate telepathically with the authorities.

As UFOlogy developed, claims about encounters with alien spacecraft grew bolder. Those who are at all familiar with the phenomenon will know that UFO sightings can occur at any of four different levels. These levels have been defined by J. Allen Hynek at the Center for UFO Studies (CUFOS) in Chicago. Arnold's sighting was a 'close encounter of the first kind' (CE1), where the witness apparently has sight of a nearby UFO, but in which there is no interaction between the object and either the environment or the witness. In a 'close encounter of the second kind' (CE2), some part of the environment is interfered with: the ground may be burned, 'crop circles' may appear, or a car's ignition may cut out. 'Close encounters of the third kind' are well understood on account of the popular film bearing that title: the 'space aliens' appear, and may assume either a humanoid or some non-human form: they do not necessarily communicate with the human witness, and in the majority of cases they do not do so. The incidence of the CE4 is more recent: in the CE4 the witness claims to have boarded the spacecraft, sometimes even to have been abducted by aliens, and at the very worst to have had surgery performed upon him or her — allegedly with a view to enabling the space aliens to understand the human body, or to insert implants for strategic purposes. (Viewers of 'The X-Files' will be thoroughly familiar with such incidents!)

As the fascination of UFOlogy grew, there arose an interest in certain circles to link UFOs with religion. One of the most notable exponents of the thesis that the origins of religion could be found in UFOs and extra-terrestrials was Erich von Daniken, whose best-seller *Chariots of the Gods?* first appeared in 1968. Von Daniken did not himself base any religion on his ideas, however: indeed that had already been done, although the UFO religions were not anything like as well known to the public as von Daniken's writings.

Of the numerous UFO religions that have taken their rise, the best known are probably the Aetherius Society, the Raëlians (now known as the Raëlian Church), and of course the notorious Heaven's Gate. Some of the UFO religions claim that extra-terrestrials possess and deliver the

message directly; others claim that they serve as spirit guides.⁴ (Scientology should probably not be classified as a UFO religion. Notwithstanding L. Ron Hubbard's career as a science fiction writer, and the distinct possibility that the OT Levels - Operating Thetan Levels - allude to the earth having been visited some 75 million years ago by members of another planet, space aliens and UFOs do not feature at the levels of Scientology that are publicly accessible and that are known to the vast majority of Scientologists.)

The Raëlians

I wish to focus on one particular case study of a UFO religion, namely Raël. While some of the UFO religions simply base themselves on messages delivered by extra-terrestrials, both Raël and Heaven's Gate combine UFOlogy with detailed biblical exegesis.

It should be mentioned that Raëlians do not consider themselves to belong to a UFO religion, claiming that they are not interested in UFOs as such, more in the 'philosophical dimension': 'The UFO dimension alone is totally boring. It is the philosophical, the religious dimension which interest us. What do Extraterrestrials change in the minds of human beings is the interesting question!'⁵

Certainly, it is the message of the extra-terrestrials that is important to Raëlians, who are not at all concerned to log up modern-day UFO sightings. They might also reasonably question the initial 'U' in 'UFO', since of course their founder-leader Raël has identified some of the flying objects and spoken to their crews. However, although from an 'emic' standpoint this is so, it is legitimate from an 'etic' standpoint to classify the Raëlian Church as a UFO religion on the ground that it is one of a cluster of religious groups that bases its teachings on past or present extra-terrestrial visits.

The small amount of academic attention given to Raël and the other UFO-religions seems more preoccupied with the UFO aspects, ignoring the fact that Raëlianism, in common with Heaven's Gate, has a strongly Bible-based theology. In order to demonstrate this, it is necessary to outline the background of their founder-leader Raël — Claude Vorilhon, to use his given name — and his encounters with the extra-terrestrials, known as the creators.

The Raëlians' ideas are explained in a number of key texts, principally *The Book Which Tells the Truth* (1974) and *Extra-Terrestrials Took Me*

Raël (Claude Vorilhon)

from the Raëlian Information Pack

(with permission from the Raëlian Religion)

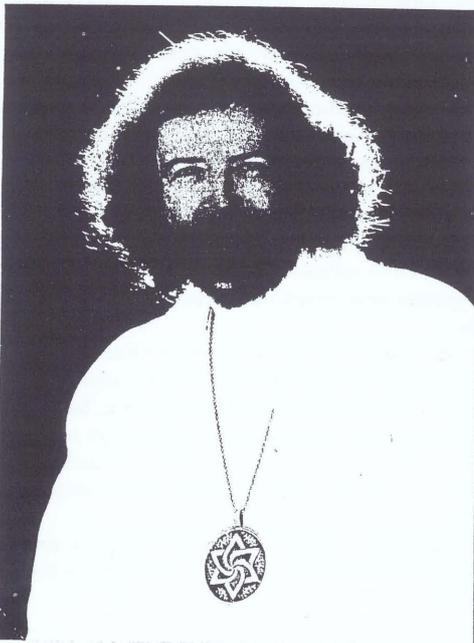
The commentary on the right hand side summarises the Raëlian's view of their own political significance.

Raël (Claude Vorilhon)
from the Raëlian Information Pack
(with permission from the Raëlian Religion)
The commentary on the right hand side summarises the Raëlian's view of their own political significance.

RAELIAN INFORMATION PACK

WHAT HAPPENED?

On 13 December 1973 French journalist Rael was contacted by a visitor from an other planet, and asked to establish an Embassy to welcome these people back to Earth.



PRENOTE

The issues brought up in this revue are not only revolutionary and controversial, but may be psychologically explosive since they touch upon the foundations of our beliefs.

However, as we progress into the 21st century, they will become increasingly topical. Indeed, whether we like it or not, they are issues we will have to face within our own lifetime, so we might as well start dealing with them now. If you consider yourself to be capable of thinking for yourself, then please consider them with an open mind.

Whether you believe or not is of no matter, what is important is that you understand and think about them.

Will the life we are synthesising in our laboratories be dangerous or benign? Are you willing to be restricted to having only one child? What will the unemployed do when all jobs become automated? Can we survive without a world government? What impact would the inevitable world currency have on our economy? Who should we select when we are capable of prolonging life? Can we still believe in God once we learn how to conquer death?

2

The Embassy for People from Space,
together with commentary from the Raëlian Information Pack
(with permission from the Raëlian Religion)

The Embassy for People from Space,
together with commentary from the Raëlian Information Pack
(with permission from the Raëlian Religion)

RAELIAN INFORMATION PACK

AN EMBASSY FOR PEOPLE FROM SPACE

In Genesis, the biblical account of creation, the word "Elohim" has been mistranslated as "God" in the singular, but it is a plural, which means "those who come from the sky".

THE MESSAGES

The messages dictated to Rael explain how life on Earth is not the result of random evolution, nor the work of a supernatural "God". It is a deliberate creation, using DNA, by a scientifically advanced people who made human beings literally in their image". References to these scientists and their work, as well as to their symbol of infinity can be found in the ancient texts of many cultures. For example, in Genesis, the biblical account of creation, the word "Elohim" has been mistranslated as "God" in the singular, but it is a plural, which means "those who come from the sky".

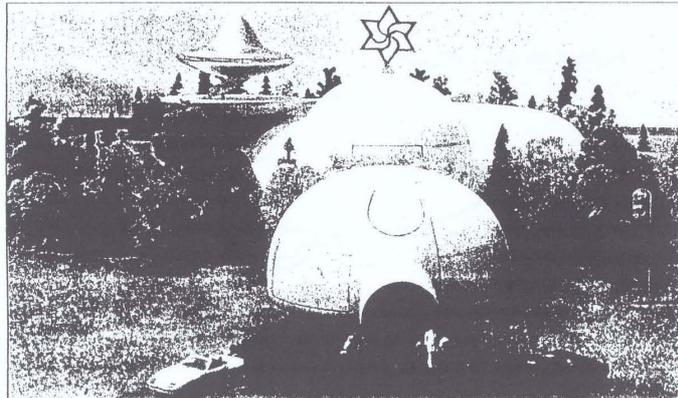
Leaving our humanity to progress by itself, the Elohim nevertheless maintained contact with us via PROPHETS, including Buddha, Moses, Jesus and Mohammed, all specially chosen and educated by them. The role of the prophets was to progressively educate humanity through the messages they taught, each time adapted to the culture and level of understanding at the time. They were also to leave traces of the Elohim so that we would be able to recognise them as our creators and fellow human beings when we had advanced enough scientifically to understand them.

THE EMBASSY

Now that Man has put his foot on the moon, and our scientists are creating life through the synthesis of DNA, we are finally capable of understanding our creators rationally instead of mystifying and dumbly adoring them. For this reason the Elohim have contacted French journalist Rael. They have asked him to make their final message known throughout the world and to establish an embassy for them where they will officially meet with us and our world governments.

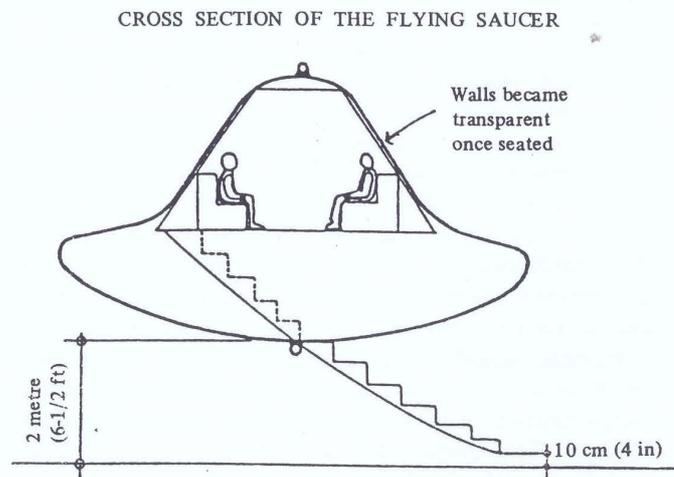
WHY DO THEY NEED AN EMBASSY?

They are not invaders. They have shown their desire to come but they respect our choice to say no. It is up to US to invite them - and our invitation is the embassy. It's the least we can do. They created us - without them we would not exist. "For us, they are the most important people in the universe. Would you send your guests out to sleep on the street or do you invite them in to the love and warmth of your own home?" Rael.
Without the neutrality of an embassy, free air space and an official welcome, an unannounced and undesired landing would have enormous political, economic and social repercussions with disastrous consequences worldwide. ■



The Flying Saucer Encountered by Raël
from Raël, *The Message Given To Me By Extraterrestrials*, p. 10.
(with permission from the Raëlian Religion)

The Flying Saucer Encountered by Raël
from Raël, *The Message Given To Me By Extraterrestrials*, p. 11.
(with permission from the Raëlian Religion).



EMBLEM ENGRAVED ON THE FLYING SAUCER AND ON THE MAN'S SUIT



- On the side of the flying saucer: 10 cm (4 in) high
 - On the man's suit: 3 cm (1-1/5 in) high
- Meaning: That which is above is like that which is below and everything is cyclic.

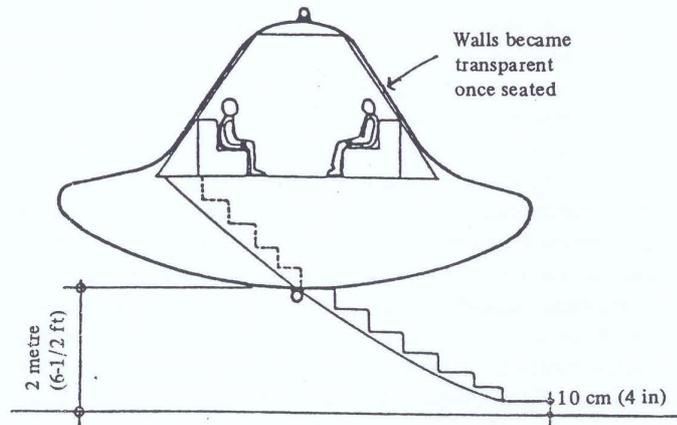
The Flying Saucer Encountered by Raël

from Raël, *The Message Given To Me By Extraterrestrials*, p. 11.
(with permission from the Raëlian Religion).

The Flying Saucer Encountered by Raël

from Raël, *The Message Given To Me By Extraterrestrials*, p. 11.
(with permission from the Raëlian Religion).

CROSS SECTION OF THE FLYING SAUCER



EMBLEM ENGRAVED ON THE FLYING SAUCER
AND ON THE MAN'S SUIT



- On the side of the flying saucer: 10 cm (4 in) high
- On the man's suit: 3 cm (1-1/5 in) high

Meaning: That which is above is like that which is below
and everything is cyclic.

To Their Planet (1975). These two books were published together in English as a single volume, in Canada in 1978, under the title *Space Aliens Took Me To Their Planet*, and in 1986 the English paperback bore the title *The Message Given To Me By Extra-Terrestrials: They Took Me To Their Planet*.

Claude Vorilhon was born in France in 1946, and acquired the ambition to become a racing driver. Vorilhon never managed to secure the necessary sponsorship to acquire his own racing car, and he earned his living by establishing a small racing magazine. He also used his literary skills to write poetry and songs, and had some degree of success as a singer. All this was to change, however, on 13 December 1973, when he was walking near the volcanoes in Clermont-Ferrand. There he saw a 'flying saucer', out of which emerged a small bearded figure with 'almond-shaped' eyes who spoke to him in French. (This being claimed to speak every earth language, as well as to communicate telepathically.) This being instructed Vorilhon to return the following day with his Bible and a notebook. He must not speak to anyone about his encounter, else the extra-terrestrial would never return. (Vorilhon's encounter would therefore be defined as close encounter of the fourth kind although the Raëlian church refers to it as a CE3.) Vorilhon's second encounter was two years later on 7 November 1975, when he was permitted to enter the creator's spacecraft, and actually taken to their planet.

The following day Vorilhon receives an extended lesson on biblical exegesis. The extra-terrestrial's exposition spans a wide range of biblical passages, although, in contrast with Christian fundamentalism, the creators acknowledge that not all parts of the Bible are equally important, and that layers of irrelevant material have been superimposed on the original message:

Only the parts of the Bible that I will translate are important. The others are only poetic-babblings (*sic*) of which I will not talk. You can surely appreciate that, thanks to the law which said that the Bible had always to be copied out without changing the smallest sign, the deeper meaning was kept intact throughout the millennia, even if the text was loaded with mystical and meaningless sentences.⁶

Vorilhon is better known to his followers as Raël. This new name was given to him by Yahweh, the leader of the Elohim. Raël means 'the one who brings the light' or 'light of the Elohim'. The first lesson Raël receives begins with Genesis 1 verse 1: 'In the beginning Elohim created

the heavens and the earth'. Elohim, the visitor appropriately points out, is a plural noun, and thus does not refer to the God of monotheism, but to a plurality of extra-terrestrial scientists who discovered the planet Earth and judged it to be suitable for the creation of artificial life. 'Elohim', it is explained, means 'those who came from the sky'.⁷ If one asks who created the creators, the Raëlian answer is that there exists a yet higher level of beings who created them, and an even higher level of beings who brought into existence the higher level beings - and so on *ad infinitum*. Raëlians see no problem in positing an infinite series of worlds and hierarchies of beings.

What follows is a detailed description of how the ancient extra-terrestrial scientists studied and developed the Earth. They placed artificial satellites around the Earth, which at that time was a mass of water and thick fog: this is the meaning of the spirit of the Elohim moving across the waters (Genesis 1:2).⁸ They then ascertain whether the sun was emitting rays that could be harmful to potential life on Earth, but concluded that 'The "light was good".'⁹ Since the research took some considerable time, the biblical 'day' refers to a zodiacal period of around 2,000 years. The process of creation, which is then described in some detail, entails the creation of aquatic and animal life, finally culminating in the creation of human beings. The fact that there are several human races indicates that there were numerous teams of creators, the best of which were based in what is now Israel.¹⁰ Raëlianism is thus presenting an account of the origins of life that is an alternative both to creationism and to evolutionism: species did not evolve by natural selection, but were not created by the God of theism.

The Elohim wanted to ensure that the newly created humans did not turn out to be of superior intelligence to their creators, hence the prohibition on the 'tree of knowledge', which entailed that humans could read as much literature as they chose, but with the exception of scientific writings. However, one group of scientists ('the serpent') had such a great love for their creation that they desired their education to be complete. These young men and women embarked on scientific study, and 'their eyes were opened': they realized that they too had the ability to become creators of life. The creators who wanted to give Adam and Eve this knowledge were exiled by the others, condemned to live out the rest of their existence on Earth. Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden in case they should find the means of infinitely prolonging their lives. The Cherubim who are said to have guarded the entrance to the forbidden Garden were 'soldiers with atomic disintegration weapons'

who stood guard in order to ensure that Adam and Eve did not return to steal further scientific secrets.

The rendering of the biblical story that follows is an account of the subsequent interaction between the Elohim and humanity. It is not possible to go into detail, but a few samples will suffice to indicate the way in which Judaeo-Christian scriptures are interpreted within the Raëlian movement. Noah's ark was in fact a spacecraft, designed to preserve the forms of earth life from radio-active fallout caused by the creators' decision to eliminate life on earth, following sexual encounters between some of the creators and human beings, the consequence of which was the birth of children with unduly exceptional knowledge. The Tower of Babel (Genesis 11: 1-9) was a rocket built to enable humans to reach the creators' planet. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was by an atomic explosion: the burns incurred by Lot's wife (Genesis 19: 23-26) were similar to those of Hiroshima victims, causing her to look like a pillar of salt. Elijah ascends to heaven in his spacecraft (2 Kings 2: 11), and Ezekiel's vision of the chariot surrounded by lightning flashes is a close encounter of the fourth kind: 'Then the spirit took me up ... and took me away ... I heard behind me a voice of a great rushing.' (Ezekiel 3).¹¹ The story of Uzzah (2 Samuel 6: 6-7), who meets an unfortunate death when trying to steady the Ark of the Covenant when the oxen stumble, is given the explanation that Uzzah must have come into contact with live electrical parts and electrocuted himself.

The story continues in similar vein into the Christian New Testament. To claim that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit entails that there was a sexual relationship between Yahweh and Mary. The star that the Magi followed was in fact a spacecraft, which guided them to his birth place. Jesus' baptism was an initiation in which the creators revealed Jesus' true identity to him, 'You are my beloved son', and inaugurated his mission. The mission was to bring the kingdom of the creators to earth: 'Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' This message was accompanied by what were presumed to be miracles, but which were really applications of the creators' advanced scientific techniques. For example, the healing of the paralytic was achieved by the creators directing a concentrated laser beam on the invalid; the feeding of the crowds was accomplished by the use of highly advanced concentrated food products; Jesus appearing to walk on water was the result of an anti-gravitational beam which the creators projected. 'There are no miracles, but only differences in levels of civilisation.'¹²

All the apparent ‘miracles’ were devices to attract the attention of Jesus’ listeners: his main mission was that of a teacher, and questions of Christology and soteriology do not feature in Raëlian thinking. Jesus’ relationship to his Father is clear: ‘our Father ... is in heaven’, and heaven is a physical planet situated at a distance of almost one light year from the earth. Jesus’ death does not achieve any salvific function, but it is necessary because the Elohim do not wish to impose themselves on humanity. For Jesus to have lived immortally on earth would have been tantamount to an invasion: this is not the way of the Elohim, who wish to be received voluntarily by the earth’s inhabitants. Both Jesus’ death and resurrection are real enough: Jesus was resuscitated by the Creators (who can do this by their advanced technology) and he is taken back to their planet at the Ascension.

Incidents in Jesus’ life are taken to corroborate this interpretation. At Jesus’ transfiguration (Mark 9: 2-13), the appearance of Moses and Elijah is explained by their emergence from a spacecraft, which emits powerful projections of light. As the creators explain to Raël:

This scene happens at night and the apostles are all frightened to see Jesus illuminated by the powerful projectors of the spacecraft, out of which Moses and Elijah stepped, still alive, thanks to the tree of life from which they had benefited. Immortality is a scientific reality, even if it does not correspond to humanity’s idea of immortality.¹³

In the Acts of the Apostles, an ‘angel’ comes to deliver Peter from prison, whereupon Peter finds that the prison doors are open and that he can escape without any hindrance. He is so surprised that he thinks this is a vision. (Acts 12: 7-9.) The explanation of this remarkable happening is as follows:

Peter, primitive as he was, thought he was having a vision as his chains fell off. He did not know about the electronic laser welding-torch which was being used by one of the creators. When such amazing things happen, we think we are dreaming.¹⁴

The arrival of Elohim is something to be welcomed. Here is the arena of opportunity, and the benefits they offer are two-fold. First they bring a new world order, which will be enjoyed by all. They have come in peace and aim to teach a new world order, with a new government and a new social and economic system. The creators go into considerable detail on

what this new system of government will be like. There will be a paradise on earth, which will be made possible by the application of the creators' advanced science and technology. The world's problems will have technological solutions: Raëlians are in favour of genetically modified foods, for example. Genetic engineering is not a problem, since the very act of creation of human life involved genetic engineering.

There will one single society, a just and humanitarian society, in which everyone is born equal, with the same wealth, and rewarded according to merit. It will be a world of peace, and military forces will be redeployed for the maintenance of public order. Medical science will rehabilitate the social deviant. It is a world to be enjoyed: gone are the pointless restrictions imposed by the Christian Church: 'everything is permitted' so long as it is compatible with an advanced society and is not harmful to anyone. Enjoying the pleasures of the senses is to be encouraged: marriage is seen as restrictive, and sexual relationships are to be encouraged freely. Abortion is totally permissible, as is nudity: one should not be ashamed of one's body, since this was the original condition of Adam and Eve in the paradise of Eden. In the creators' planet to which Raël is taken, scientists have created robots who simulate nude human dancers and who are freely available for entertainment or for sexual relationships.

Education is important for a highly scientific and technological society. Humans should be encouraged to develop intellectually and personally. The creators are well capable of producing robots and other technological devices for undertaking unfulfilling tasks, and hence humans should be encouraged to enjoy leisure, to develop intellectually and personally, to enjoy freedom, and to promote universal fraternity and peace. Activities that are particularly encouraged are scientific research (of course), meditation, music, painting, and doing nothing!

Since this new society depends on scientific, technological and intellectual advancement, it is important that it should be governed by the appropriate leaders. Previous governments have been dominated by the rich, the strong and the brutal, and even democracy, although much extolled by human beings, is not capable of ensuring that the right leaders are in office. Accordingly, the Raëlian Church advocates geniocracy. The system of voting will be abolished, and only those whose intelligence is fifty percent above the average will be eligible for public office.

The second benefit the creators offer is reserved for those whose deeds merit it: immortality. Being a society with an interest in scientific advancement, medical progress is highly valued, and hence at death all

humans are encouraged to donate their bodies to science. Since religion belongs to the past, there will be no religious funerals. Some cells of the deceased should be left in the Embassy, and, if one's deeds merit it, the creators can use the deposited cells to create an immortal replica of the deceased. The cells of the frontal bone between the eyes on one's forehead are particularly important for this purpose, but the scientific expertise of the creators makes it possible for them to create a replica from a single cell. Everyone's actions are monitored and recorded by computer, and after one's death the Grand Council of the Eternals meets to consider whether the deceased is to be chosen for re-creation. This benefit, the 'secret of eternity',¹⁵ is bestowed exclusively upon geniuses, although it is also possible for the creators to recreate evil people to experience eternal punishment. In the main, however, most earth people will simply experience oblivion. (Whether this kind of re-creation enables the real 'me' to survive death, and hence offers hope for a future state, is an interesting philosophical question, which has been taken up by philosophers of religion like John Hick.¹⁶ Unfortunately I cannot pursue this here.)

The Age of Aquarius

Claude Vorilhon's birth in 1946 heralds the new zodiacal age of Aquarius. It was formerly taught that Raël was selected by the Elohim, being born of a Jewish father and Catholic mother. However, according to more recent teaching his father is in fact Yahweh, who is also the father of Jesus. To signal the arrival of this new era, Raélians have defined their own calendar, in which year 1 is defined as 1946. Further evidence of the inauguration of this new era was the setting up of the State of Israel in 1948. Some fifty years after this date, the time has now come to receive the extra-terrestrials and to build them an embassy. Israel has been chosen for this purpose, and Raélians have written to Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu requesting permission to acquire land in or near Jerusalem. The re-definition of the calendar underlines the status that is accorded to Raël: he is the *mashiach*, the messiah, and the proposed embassy will be the new Third Temple.

We had asked that an Embassy be built to welcome us near Jerusalem, and the authorities of the stiff necked people have refused several times to give their authorization and grant the status of extra-territoriality necessary.¹⁷

In this context it is perhaps worth commenting on the Raëlian symbol. It consists of two stars, one upright and pointing upwards, and a second inverted, pointing downwards, interlocking with it. Until recently, the middle area common to both stars was occupied by a swastika, being the ancient Aryan symbol of power. In his original encounter Raël reports having seen this symbol on the creators' spacecraft. For obvious reasons the symbol has now been modified, and the swastika has been redesigned as a kind of 'swirl'. The swastika symbol, they point out, has been popularly misunderstood, and of course, the presence of the swastika on their central symbol would be unlikely to make the Israeli government more amenable to the building of their embassy.

Perhaps predictably, the Israeli government has been uncooperative with the Raëlians, who now accuse the Jews of repeating their mistakes of the past, by refusing to recognize their true creators and the arrival of the messiah. As in the past, other nations will be approached in their stead, and when they receive permission from another government, Israel will again be given one final chance.

Flying Saucers as Modern Myth

If the notion of a wholly empirical religion like the Raëlian Church seems surprising, the writings of Carl Jung offer an important means of understanding the possible links between UFOlogy and religion. As early as 1959, the Jung devoted an entire book to the phenomenon of flying saucers, entitled *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*. Jung argues, as his title implies, that stories of UFO sightings have features comparable with religious myths. They are rumours ('visionary rumours') that circulate within society, but which receive no firm objective corroboration. At a literal level, they appear to be impossible: the 'spaceships' travel at impossibly high speeds, such that the heat generated by the friction would make it impossible for the crew to survive. They make sharp turns at impossible angles, and appear to be weightless. (All this is impossible, of course, unless one accepts the supportive hypothesis that the space crews come from worlds that are amazingly advanced scientifically, phenomenally beyond our present levels of knowledge.) Jung offers no firm opinion on whether elements of the UFO experience draw from objective reality in the physical world, but the descriptions seem to suggest that some kind of 'psychic projection' occurs. Those who experience UFOs have repressed wishes, and in the UFO experience elements of the subconscious become visible. In Jung's view, the synchronicity of the experiences tends to support the

idea that there is a common human need that these rumours of visions fulfil.

Jung describes the visions as ‘numinous images’¹⁸ and argues that they are manifestations of ‘archetypal images’, of which Jung has written extensively elsewhere. Flying saucers, he notes, tend to come in one of two shapes: lens-shaped and cigar-shaped. There is little difficulty, he believes, in attaching significance to the former: the circle is the archetypal symbol of wholeness, representing psychological order. It is the opposition of confusion, perplexity and fragmentation. It is the symbol of eternity, having no beginning and no end. Jung compares it with the mandala, which is based on the circle.¹⁹

The cigar shape may connote phallic symbolism. However, unlike Freud, whom Jung believes to have offered sexual explanations of far too much, Jung suggests that there are other basic human needs that require satisfaction. One is food: a cigar-like object can be put in one’s mouth. This imagery could therefore connote that there is a spiritual hunger that needs satisfying, and which is not being satiated by mainstream religions. In the face of the nuclear threat, and the fear of international conflict, humankind has a collective fear, and begins to see signs in the heavens.²⁰ As von Daniken was also to highlight a decade later, Jung draws a comparison with Ezekiel’s vision of the heavenly chariot descending on Babylon, in a time of uncertainty and political turmoil.

I do not propose to determine whether Jung’s analysis is credible with regard to the wider UFO phenomenon. When one considers the Raélians, however, there are certainly features that offer confirmation of Jung’s theory. Raëlianism offers a means of satisfying one’s spiritual hunger. Faced with the question of whether there is a god, and whether God’s existence is still credible in a scientific and technological age, Raëlianism offers a clear answer. It offers a scientific answer, which purports to be a major advance on the answers offered by the mainstream churches. Raëlianism dispenses with the need to accept speculative metaphysical answers to religious questions, offering a ‘scientific’ religion that reduces everything to physicalistic terms:

The Raëlian religion is an atheist religion. A religion in which human beings address themselves to other human beings. We were created by humans who come from the sky. They created diversity. This consciousness should help us to be more tolerant with one another.²¹

Raël's own encounters with the extra-terrestrials assume the form of religious visions. Vorilhon's first encounter with the creator is a kind of inaugural vision, comparable to that of Isaiah in the Jerusalem Temple. (Isaiah 6.) It is striking, discontinuous with every day experience, with one individual - Vorilhon - being singled out to be granted this quasi-numinous experience on his own. The fact that Raël's followers have to take his word for such matters, presumably not enjoying similar experiences themselves, is characteristic of the nature of prophecy. The average Jew, for example, did not have the powerful numinous experiences granted to the prophets, who were deemed to have privileged access to the divine council: 'Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets'. (Amos 3: 7; see also 1 Kings 22: 19.) Like Isaiah, this inaugural vision is a commissioning: Raël is to proclaim the message of the extra-terrestrials to the rest of the world.

In conclusion, Raël offers a form of religion that dispenses with an invisible God and abstruse theological explanations. It is an unashamedly self-professed 'atheistic religion' whose cosmology is entirely physicalistic. But, more than that, Raëlianism not only offers a religion, but a theory about the origin of all religions. Pioneer scholars such as Spencer, Frazer, Tylor, Marett and Lang have got it all wrong: religion did not arise from ancestor worship, from animism or from magic. It all began from ancient extra-terrestrial visitors who created life on earth.

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