



CANADIAN CULTS

BLIND FAITH OR NEW RELIGION?

Craig Silverman

You call them up using the number you found on-line and ask when the next meeting is. They tell you it is every Wednesday and anyone is welcome. You just have to call another number and tell them you want to come. You call the other number, discover it's a pager and leave your number. A friendly man named Martin calls you back and tells you where the meeting is.

That night, you travel to a brick apartment building in Verdun, a working-class neighbourhood in Montreal. You walk down into the basement, led by a sign announcing "The True Face of God" and displaying a stream of alien heads. Inside the immaculate room with hardwood floors, there are six men, mostly in their thirties and forties, many with long hair. They all wear large amulets bearing a swirling Star of David around their necks. They each approach and shake your hand, look you in the eyes and say their names. They smile, they joke and they lead you to a table with books, flyers and CD-ROMs.

Martin, a fit man in his late thirties or early forties with long hair, hands you cards and a book titled *The Message Given by Extraterrestrials*. There is another title, *Sensual Meditation*, with an accompanying CD-ROM. Three other people are expected tonight, Martin says. There will be a video followed by a question-and-answer period. He leaves you alone to read the book and does the same for the remaining three men when they arrive.

The other men with amulets have left and, after taking the books from the visitors and orderly placing them back on the table, Martin begins the video presentation. The first images are that of satellite dishes, people on cell phones and other technological items. The video tells us we are in an age when science has told us much about human life, such as how our individual DNA determines who we are. It explains that DuPont is making machines to manage DNA. Then, a pretty blond woman begins to speak. She says that, for ages, mankind has had the same questions: "Who are we?," "Where do we come from?" and "Where are we going?" She then tells of a French journalist that was visited by aliens. A being emerged from a spaceship and informed him that they are our creators. The alien told this man, Claude Vorilhon, owner of a race car magazine, that he is meant to bring this message to the world: Since the detonation of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima, our world has entered the apocalyptic age, the scientific age, and the time is ripe for our creators to return to earth and share their knowledge with us. The alien said they had contacted previous prophets such as Jesus, Buddha, Moses and Muhammad, and it was Vorilhon's turn. He would become known as Rael and be given the mission to tell the world the true story of our creation and to build an embassy for our alien creators to return to. The video ends with the same uplifting electronic music and an invitation for you to learn more about this movement, the Raelians. Martin turns the lights on.

In rooms all over the world, on any given night, this scene plays out. This time, it was an open meeting of the Raelian movement, a worldwide organization that claims 60,000 members and preaches that humans were created by a more advanced race than us. The leader, Rael, says he is the brother of Jesus and a prophet entrusted with this message and the task of building an earth embassy for our extraterrestrial creators. The Raelians recently came to international fame thanks to Rael's involvement with CloneAid, a secretive company that claims to have created the first human clones.

For many, the Raelians are a group with nothing more than an amusing take on our existence; for others, it is a dangerous group that has potentially dire consequences. But

what's not debatable is that groups like the Raelians (or Scientology, Jehovah's Witnesses or Hare Krishnas) thrive in today's Canada.

NEW RELIGIONS OR BRAINWASHING

According to experts, Canada is a welcoming place for new religious movements and so-called cults. Our society strongly believes in religious freedom and has entrenched this right in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. And so, the leaders of these movements have come to view Canada as a safe and welcoming place where they can practise their faith. "Canadians tend to be much more tolerant of unusual religious groups," says Susan Palmer, a religious studies professor at Concordia University and author of seven books on new religious movements. "We don't have a strong national identity or value system, so we tend to be more experimental in our idealism and lifestyles."

This experimentalism has increased with the decline of our traditional dominant religions, Catholicism and Protestantism. The latest census data from Statistics Canada revealed that fewer and fewer Canadians identify with any of the major religions. The 2001 census found that 16 per cent of the

ARE THEY CULTS OR MERELY NEW, ALBEIT STRANGE, RELIGIONS? ARE THEY DANGEROUS TO OTHERS AND TO THEMSELVES?

population claim to have no religion, up 44 per cent from 12 per cent a decade ago. Seven out of 10 Canadians answered either Roman Catholic or Protestant when asked their religion, but these numbers have been in decline, with the number of Protestants dropping by 35 per cent since 1991. As for new religious movements, the Raelians made the census, and a surprising 20,000 Canadians identified themselves as followers of the Jedi religion. (It was later revealed that those choosing to "use the force" were spurred on by a mass e-mail calling upon people to choose "Jedi" in protest over what is seen as an intrusive question.)

DEFINING THE MODERN CULT

As these groups become a common fixture in our society, the inevitable questions arise: Are they cults or merely new, albeit strange, religions? Are they dangerous to others and to themselves?

The modern definition of cult has emerged to connote the Charles Mansons, Jim Jones and Heaven's Gates of the world: dangerous, manipulative groups led by individuals who centralize power and even the concept of reality. To label a group a cult is to condemn them. The process of determining which groups warrant this sentence is a difficult one.



Rael believes aliens are our creators and will soon return to earth

"A cult usually has three characteristics: The first is that the defining element of the group is a living leader, an individual who, as a personality, defines the group," says Rick Ross, a U.S.-based cult expert who has performed several interventions to extricate cult members in Canada. "The second is that you can see that a thought reform program is underway where a person gives up autonomous and critical thinking and becomes dependent on the living leader to make value judgments for them. The third is whether the group is destructive." But even a definition such as this depends on the person applying it.

"It's in the eye of the beholder," says Palmer, who herself has been branded a "cult apologist" for viewing groups such as the Raelians as new religious movements rather than cults. "I don't see them as problematic at all. Some are occasionally, but no more so than any more mainstream religion is. I think it is a sign of health that we have these groups, that we live in a country where people can experiment and come up with new revelations on the meaning of life." Ross says that many groups may seem harmless, but it's their worship of, and subjugation to, a living leader that opens the door to danger.

"This is an inherent danger in cults," says Ross. "The people are basically dependent on the leader to make value judgments and, in many cases, define reality. That dependency on a single individual is unsettling when that person is often very unstable. When they slip over the edge like [Jim Jones or David Koresh] and into insanity, the group goes over the edge with them."

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WHEN THINGS GO WRONG

Canada has seen its own examples of cults that went over the edge. Perhaps the most famous is the mass suicides associated with the Order of the Solar Temple. In the fall of 1994, a fire at a condominium complex north of Montreal drew firefighters, who quickly discovered two charred bodies. Then, in an adjacent building, they found three more victims, including a three-month-old baby. Autopsies quickly revealed the corpses had, in fact, been bludgeoned to death long before any fire was set, with the baby dying after being stabbed with a wooden

Photo: The Raelian Movement

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stake. Once the owner of the building was found to be Jo Di Mambro, a founder and leader of the Order of the Solar Temple, suspicion turned to the religious group. Worldwide arrest warrants were issued for Di Mambro and the Temple's charismatic leader, Luc Jouret. But before they could be apprehended, they orchestrated mass suicides in Switzerland the very next day, killing themselves and taking 46 followers with them.

The group believed its leaders were reincarnated members of 14th-century Christian Order of the Knights Templar and that they would lead them after death to a planet that revolves around the star Sirius. The group's doctrine was a combination of Christianity mixed with New Age philosophy, homeopathic medicine and environmentalism. Jouret, a homeopathic physician, reportedly believed himself to be Christ.

Jouret and Di Mambro immigrated to Quebec in 1986, around the time they began warning of a coming catastrophe in which "the world would soon be engulfed in warfare and famine. Only Quebec would be spared..." In Quebec, the group attracted senior executives from the province's energy behemoth Hydro-Québec, and records showed some members had donated over \$1 million to the group. After the initial deaths in 1994, the group became less visible. But in 1995, and again in 1997, there were subsequent mass suicides in Switzerland and Quebec, claiming another 21 lives.

Another recent example largely manifested itself in Western Canada. The Vancouver Church of Christ, a Christian-based group, drew the attention of both police and university administrators for its aggressive recruitment on university campuses. The chaplain at Simon Fraser University warned that the group manipulates scriptures and controls members by having a mentor shadow them at all times, in addition to demanding 10 per cent of members' salaries. In 1997, Ross was hired by a family to extract their daughter from the group, after she cut off contact with them.

"I met with her for seven minutes before she ran into her room and locked the door," Ross told one newspaper.

As Canadians continue to move away from traditional faiths, it is likely that these groups, be they dangerous cults or simply new faiths, will remain a fixture of society. Their appeal,

much like every faith, has its roots in the human condition. "Just as we need scapegoats in society, we also need heroes," says Phillips Stevens, a cult expert at the University of Buffalo.

Palmer agrees that people will continue to search for new meaning through these groups.

"The essential thing is that they answer questions about the meaning of life, where we come from and issues of death," she says. "I think that society in North America today is a very favourable environment for these new religions to flourish." She cautions, however, that our society is quick to condemn these groups and that more independent research and information is required. "Public knowledge and understanding is abysmal," says Palmer. "You get such a contrast between what the groups say and what their enemies do that it's hard to find middle ground."

THE QUESTIONS BEGIN

You ask Martin why he became a Raelian. "When I heard about it, it just made sense to me that we were created by science and other beings," he says. That was over 20 years ago.

The questions turn to cloning. Martin says yes, he believes that CloneAid has cloned a baby. Asked what happens when the embassy is built, Martin tells you the extraterrestrial creators will come down and begin to impart their knowledge until we become advanced enough to create another world the way they did. He says we will be cloned in order to achieve eternal life, which will enable us to accumulate this knowledge and advance ourselves. Those who wish not to be cloned are welcomed to die naturally, he says.

After 15 minutes of answering questions, Martin is finished.

"Why was Rael chosen?"

"You should read the book," he says.

"How do you become a Raelian?"

"Read the book," he tells you.

"What are your ceremonies?"

"You must read the book," he says, motioning to the table of goods. "There is so much knowledge in it that you need to read it for yourself. I could answer your questions, but you need to discover it for yourself."

He says the book costs \$25 for the French version, \$18 for the English.

"And now," he says, "I think we are finished."



Prospective Extraterrestrial Embassy