

Feature

cult or cult status?

Nick Calacouras

*When it comes to cults
like the Raelians, it's
difficult not to proceed
with caution.*

*But despite all the
alien-talk, are numbers
the only difference
between popularity
and insanity?*

In 1998, Charleston couple, Mark and Tracy Hunt, entered into an agreement with Clonaid. In exchange for half a million dollars, this US-based company promised to successfully clone the grieving parents recently deceased 10 month old son. Within a year, the Hunts realised the futility of this endeavour and walked away, mourning the loss of their son for the second time.

The story does not end there. This is because Clonaid is not your ordinary Bio-Medical Research company. They are, in fact, the corporate face of the Raelians, a sect convinced that human life on Earth is the result of a genetic engineering project run by super-intelligent extra-terrestrials. Their founder, French journalist Claude Vorilhon, who has been renamed Rael, was approached

by these aliens 30 years ago. The aliens, known as Elohim, have asked Rael to establish an embassy here on Earth. Since then, Rael has gathered a following of 55,000 people from 84 different countries.

In an attempt to emulate their creators, the Raelians have dedicated their lives to the pursuit of genetic manipulation. Last December, they claimed to have cloned the worlds first child. However, as of yet, the world has seen little proof.

While the Raelians are a non-profit organisation, one can purchase books and tapes from their internet shop at affordable prices, with all proceeds going towards the construction of the first trans-planetary embassy.

The Raelians are a cult. Unfortunately, the word 'cult' can conjure many images without leaving a precise definition. Essentially, a cult is a movement exhibiting a great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing. Cults often seem to be leader-centred. These leaders often dictate how members should think. They also claim an exalted status and attempt to bond the group together through isolation from non-members.

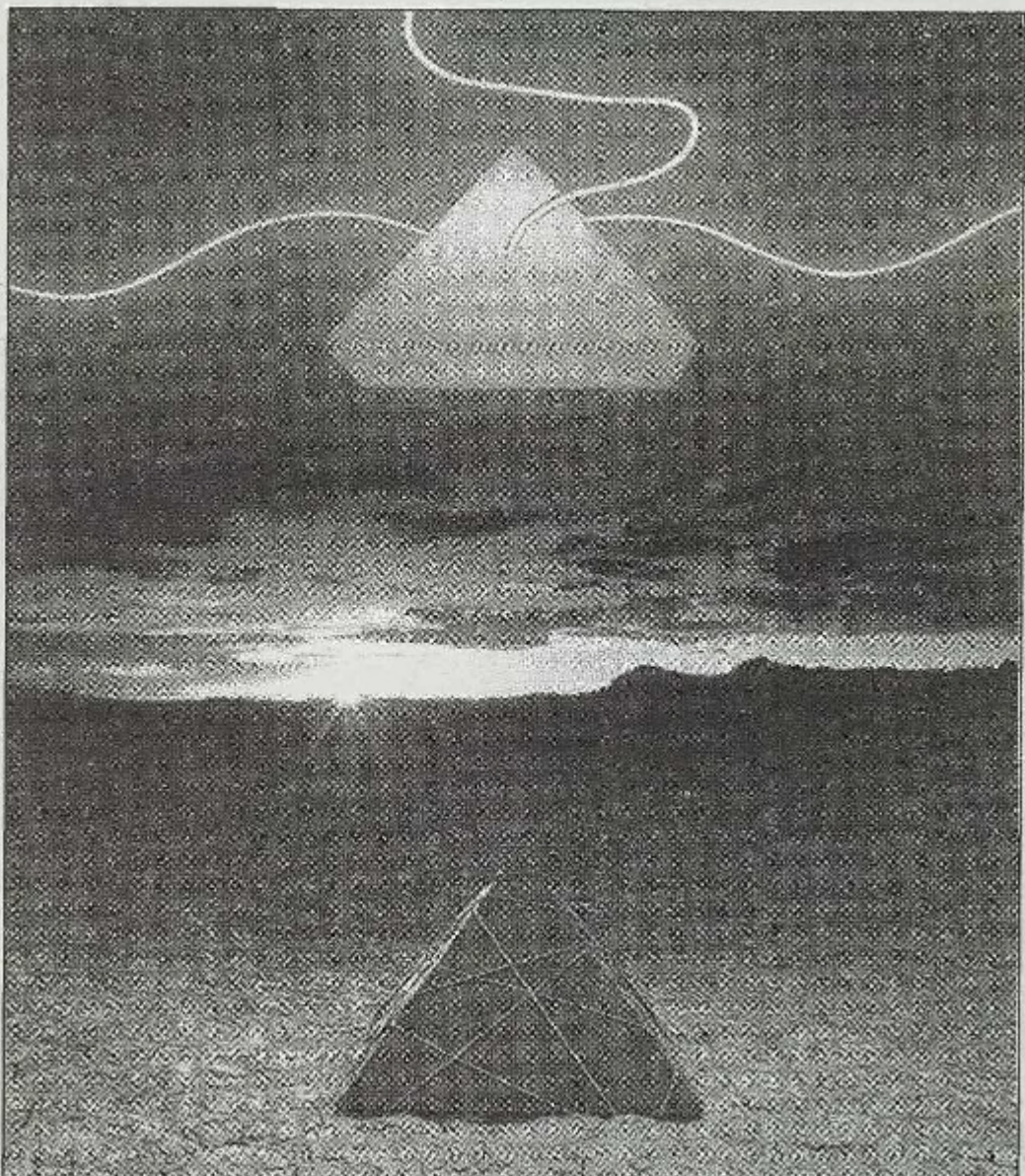
UFO Cults, such as the Raelians, are one of the more recent form to develop. They are not-unlike the Heaven's Gate sect, whose claim to fame arose in March 1997 when


claim to fame arose in March 1997 when 39 bodies were discovered in San Diego. The cult's founders were Marshall Applewhite and Bonnie Nesttles, who referred to themselves as Do and Ti respectively (also known at times as Bo and Peep). Do met Ti as a patient in a psychiatric hospital where she was a nurse. Claiming to be genderless aliens in human form, they believed that the soul existed on another plane and was merely occupying the body as a shell. They developed a following and formed a web design company, suitably named Higher Source. The money from this allowed them to rent a nine-bedroom mansion and fill it with computers.

When the Hale-Bopp comet was discovered in July 1995, amateur astronomer Chuck Shramek took a photograph which revealed an object trailing in its wake. Still grieving from loosing Ti to cancer in 1985, Do believed this to be a spaceship, whose alien occupants would take their souls to heaven. So in 1997, 21 men and 18 women swallowed phenobarbital, mixed in apple sauce and washed it down with vodka. As it turns out, the object in the photograph was not a spaceship, but a distant star, distorted by the inferior optics of an

distorted by the inferior optics of an amateur's telescope.

So what kind of person is led into this type of life? According to the 'Cult Awareness and Information Centre,' we are all susceptible. Being seduced into a cult is not unlike being talked into signing up to a phone plan by a pushy salesman





or being encouraged to have that extra drink by a pretty face at the bar.

Clinical experience does tend to suggest that a very large majority of cult joiners experience significant levels of stress. Amongst young joiners, this often comes from romantic failure, academic pressure or a lack of direction in general.

It should be noted that while many cults are dangerous and unhealthy, others are more benign. Some communities or groups, while passionate in their views, are no threat to themselves or others.

Regardless, governments and community groups are wary of any cultist activity. In 1984, the European Parliament passed the 'Cottrell Resolution,' requiring member states to pool their information about "new organisations" as a prelude to developing "ways of ensuring the effective protection of Community citizens."

When the Branch Davidians repelled an incursion by US Government troops in February 1993 from the Mount Carmel

February 1993 from the Mount Carmel Centre in Waco, Vernon Howell (better known as David Koresh) led a 51-day siege that caught the attention of the world. In their attempts to end the siege, government forces cut the power and subjected the occupants to strobe lighting and heavy rock 'n' roll music.

When this failed, the music was replaced by the sound of a dentist drill (Koresh's file indicated that he feared the dentist – how clever can an intelligence network get), which was periodically interrupted by the voice of Nancy Sinatra singing "These boots are made for walking." This strategy seemed to be successful, as the occupants set the compound on fire.

Frantic family members sometimes turn to deprogrammers – mercenaries who isolate cult members from the group and use whatever methods necessary to undo whatever teachings or 'brainwashing' that resulted. In 1982 Max Jones had already sold

his Western Australian house to get his brother, Lyall, out of the Moonies. These are the followers of Sun Myung Moon, a South Korean evangelist Unification Church. He offered 60 Minutes the rights to film the

...erred to minimize the rights to him the deprogramming if they assisted in the expenses. 60 Minutes even placed a plant in the cult to assist in the kidnapping. Steven Hassan was inducted into the Moonies as a 19 year old in the 1970's. After 27 months, his parents deprogrammed him. He now runs an organisation called 'Freedom of Mind.' From here, he has developed a non-coercive approach to deprogramming as an effective and legal alternative for families to help cult members. This approach utilises family and

friends and teaches them how to strategically influence the individual involved in the group.

Hassan told the Boston Globe that "the cults that were around then on street corners now have businesses and business offices, and people have ties and jackets." The Hare Krishnas wear suits and wigs. The Moonies own part of the Washington Times and are the largest waterfront owners in Gloucester.

Don't make the mistake of assuming that these cults are the product of modern man. As long as there have been people willing to believe, others have stepped up to the plate

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to lead. In 400 AD, a Jewish man from Crete claimed to be the Second Coming of the Messiah. Calling himself Moses, he planned to part the sea (in following with his namesake) and lead his people to the promised land. Standing at the shore, he openly commanded heaven to allow him and his several hundred followers to pass. The waves simply lapped with indifference. Moses II then instructed his loyal followers to have faith and march into the water. Needless to say, no miracle occurred and many trusting souls perished. Moses' body was never recovered and he was never heard from again.

At the turn of the first Century, Suetonius wrote that "punishments were also inflicted on the Christians, a sect professing a new and mischievous religious belief." Christianity was deemed to be a cult and was similarly persecuted by the State. So what does this then mean for the thousands of cults that exist today? Is the only thing standing between them and legitimate religions simply the number of

religions simply the number of followers?

We find it easy to mock the actions made by these cultists as they act in faith. Be it self-castration or an attempt to build an Alien Embassy on Earth, the news stories appear on our televisions and in our papers, and we smirk.

The followers of Moses II and the Branch Davidians may be separated by a millennia, but they are joined by a common trait: they had faith. Once upon a time, faith was considered a virtue. Today, it's the stigma of quacks and believers.

If we have lost our ability to have faith, that leaves us with a question about those who follow these cults. Are they weak because they choose to believe or are we weak because we can't?

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