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'Ufology: The Next World Religion'?

From: Stig Agermose <Stig_Agermose@online.pol.dk>
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The UFO part starts about half-way down.

Stig

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Prophets of the Third Millennium

By Gayle M.B. Hanson

High technology isn't the only thing that the year 2000 has affected. Many are betting celestial events and religious phenomena will mark the turn of the century.

If you're a betting kind of fellow with a few dollars to burn, you might consider this longshot: British betting shops William Hill and Ladbrokes currently are offering a chance to clean up big time at the stroke of midnight, Dec. 31, 1999. All they have to do is beat the 10,000-to-1 odds being offered by the legal bookies that night won't turn to day as the clocks tick into the year 2000.

If that payoff doesn't sound grand enough and money truly is no object, the estimable English oddsmakers are offering million-to-1 odds that the world won't end before midnight, Dec. 31, 1999. Trouble is, it would take more than a 250-pound mook named Vinnie to collect that wager. A better bet might be the 50-to-1 odds Ladbrokes is willing to offer that the United Nations will confirm the existence of alien life in the year 2000. As the extraterrestrial tourist from the 1950s science-fiction classic, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, might say: "Klatuu barada nikto!"

Ah, the millennium. With fewer than 500 days until clocks tick into the year 2000, the world is awash in speculation. From the biblical prophecies of the rapture to the Hopi legends and UFology of the New Age, millions around the world are being swept up in a global wave of intrigue about what awaits us in the third millennium. Trouble is, even as the countdown continues there seems to be a little problem about settling the date when the millennium will occur.

"There's a lot of confusion about when the millennium is going to

actually begin," says astrologer T. Chase, who plans to be somewhere in the Bermuda Triangle when the clocks tick over. "Some people think it is going to begin midnight, Dec. 31, 1999; others expect it the following year.

So does anybody really have the date down with certainty?

Experts from the Center for Millennial Studies, or CMS, at Boston University say the new millennium officially will not begin until midnight on Dec. 25, 2000, which could make things particularly interesting for any flying reindeer looking for a solid place to land. In backing up their predictions the folks at CMS cite no less an authority than Denis the Diminutive, a.k.a. Dionysus Exiguus, who calculated the date way back in 525 A.D. The little guy received some big support for his predictions during the eighth century when both St. Bede in England and the Carolingians in continental Europe backed up his millennial claim date.

Conformity of calculations was moving along pretty well until the last 200 years when, as the culture increasingly has become secularized, according to the CMS, there has been a shift to the use of something scholars refer to as the "common era," or C.E. According to this system, the millennium will begin Dec. 31, 2000, at midnight. So if you're planning on partying like it's 1999, you might want to consider keeping your party hat on for the entire year.

This is not to say that everyone is planning on having a swell time. For some religious groups the millennium holds portents of what many believe may be the second coming of Christ and the end of the world as we know it. Belief that the millennium has deep religious significance transcends many of the world's great faiths including Judaism, Christianity and Islam. But, say some, this ain't the first time we've gone around the Doomsday track.

"For a long time it was believed that the year 1000 passed like any other year," says Richard Landes, a medieval scholar who founded the CMS in 1992. "It was thought that there weren't end-time beliefs, but more and more researchers are coming to understand that in fact there was a lot of apocalyptic activity that began around the year 1000 and lasted through 1033."

Among the occurrences of the time were large-scale pilgrimages to Jerusalem, apocalyptic literature and the interpretation of earthquakes and famine as indicators that the end of the world was at hand. In the year 996 A.D., Abbo of Fleury recollects, "Concerning the end of the world, as a youth I heard a sermon in a church in Paris that as soon as the number of 1000 years should come, and not long after, the Last Judgment would follow."

While apocalyptic believers were disappointed when their predictions proved premature, according to Landes it is typical for religious believers to alter their beliefs to take into account the failure of scripted scenarios. "We talk about cognitive dissonance that occurs when the faith-based expectations of a believer don't happen. They just reorient their faith in a low-key way," he says. So even if the year 2000 should pass without the Judgment Day occurring, Landes assures Insight there is no denying that such beliefs will have a strong impact on our culture for several decades into the next century.

"One of the things we hope to do is have a really well-organized operation so that we can be in place to interview individuals after the millennium occurs," says Landes.

Among the more interesting phenomena that Landes and his colleagues at Boston University are studying is the growing intersection between UFOlogy and millennialism. A study performed two years ago showed that approximately 60 percent of Americans believe in intelligent extraterrestrial life. This belief, coupled with Judeo-Christian cultural background, has made for some interesting analyses of the future. These range from the pessimistic fears of the Watchers, whose World Wide Web site lays out claims of a link between Satan and life on Mars, to the benevolent prophecies of the Raelians, who believe mankind was created by the Elohim, who slowly are revealing their hand to us even as they prepare to return to save us from ourselves.

"Most people are very fond of the UFO phenomenon, but when you start telling them that they are the result of the creation by alien beings, these are staggering implications," explains Michel Beluet, the director of UFOland, the Raelian religion's alien theme park outside of Montreal. "When Rael received his prophecies the first thing he asked was, 'Are you going to give me anything to substantiate our claim?'

They said, 'No.'"

However, that didn't stop Rael from launching the UFO-based religious group that now claims about 40,000 members globally. Their belief system, which was outlined by Rael, a former journalist and sometime Formula One auto racer during the 1970s, includes a prophecy that when the Elohim return they will take a minimum of 144,000 away from the Earth and then return them to repopulate civilization after a cataclysm. That the Raelian prophecy is similar to a number of other prophecies among the world's religious groups is explained by Beluet as a remnant of the teachings left behind by our alien creators.

Such themes, says Philip Lamy, a cultural anthropologist at Castleton College in Vermont, are common throughout many contemporary UFO-based epistemologies. "I really believe that UFOlogy is going to be the next world religion," says the professor, who currently is working on a book supporting such claims. "We live in secular times, and UFOlogy is a religion that even atheists might enjoy. The idea that there are superevolved intelligent beings out there is one that appeals to a lot of people."

According to Lamy and others studying the UFO phenomena, most groups which believe that aliens are going to return to Earth as part of the millennium see these extraterrestrials as a force for good. The Raelians, for instance, are said to combine a "love thy neighbor" philosophy with an embrace of cloning technology. After all, claims Beluet, it was the Elohim that created us out of DNA, and with the advent of cloning they are revealing more of their plan for us. The Raelians hope to clone a human being in the not-too-distant future. "I can guarantee that the new millennium will start with the presence of a human clone," Beluet predicts.

"This is what I see as the marriage of science fiction and science fact," declares Lamy. "More and more groups are using the advent of technological innovation as proof-perfect that we indeed have been visited by aliens. That and the permeation of our popular culture by the UFO experience has very big ramifications in the millennium."

But millennial UFOlogy has its dark side, researchers warn. And certainly that dark side manifested itself in the suicide of the members of the Heaven's Gate cult at the time of the nearest approach to the planet of the comet Hale-Bopp, a celestial event that many in apocalyptic circles viewed as a harbinger of cosmic change.

"Our interest in aliens definitely has a pattern throughout history," claims Lamy. "At various times we see the aliens as beneficent, and at other times they are viewed as being hostile. Certainly E.T. and Close Encounters of the Third Kind portrayed the visitors as friendly. Independence Day and Mars Attacks! did not. Perhaps the most important fusion of those two ideas in popular culture is represented in the television program Star Trek in which alien life forms weren't either good or bad but, like us, a mix of both."

Should those casting about find the outer-space ideas of the Raelians a little foreign, they might check out the beliefs of the Atlantans, whose millennial ideology is based upon the idea that the lost city of Atlantis will reemerge from the ocean floor sometime after the clock strikes midnight at the turn of the century.

Whether you believe that the millennium holds special religious significance, that UFOs are going to spirit people away by the millions or that the advanced culture of the Atlantans will rise up from the sea, the folks at the Center for Millennial Studies say we all will be touched in some way by millennial thinking. "At around the year 2000 we begin to read events in apocalyptic mode," says Landes. "Much of this stuff is going on below the level of direct consciousness. But we are all going to be affected by it no matter what our beliefs."

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