

## NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS AND SCIENCE: RAEI'S PROGRESSIVE PATRONIZING PARASITISM

by *Stefano Bigliardi*

*Abstract.* The article examines the concoction of religion and “science” contained in the revelation that substantiates a new religion: Raelianism, founded and led by the prophet Claude Vorilhon/Rael after having received a revelation in 1974. After a detailed examination both of Rael’s prophetic message and his/the Raelians’ interpretative practices, an *ad hoc* model is presented to describe such concoction (“progressive patronizing parasitism”), and it is compared to other models. It is in particular claimed that Rael, while seemingly talking about “science,” is actually constructing a science-fictional and even pseudoscientific narrative. The article finally raises the question whether the discussion of the science–religion interaction from the viewpoint of traditional religions can be considered to be immune to the usage of such rhetorical devices.

*Keywords:* new religious movements; pseudoscience; Rael; Raelianism; science fiction; UFO religions; Claude Vorilhon

---

We read in the conclusive remarks of Benjamin E. Zeller’s pivotal monograph *Prophets and Prottons* (Zeller 2010) that “the serious study of the intellectual positions of NRMs [New Religious Movements]” is a rather neglected matter since “monographic studies of new religions tend not to focus on the content of the religious messages proffered by such groups, but instead consider sociological issues.” The U.S. scholar, who in his own monograph writes about the science–religion relationship according to, respectively, the Unification Church, the Hare Krishna Movement, and Heaven’s Gate, closes such observations by stating: “I hope that other students of new religions similarly will look to their theologies as fertile ground for exploration” (Zeller 2010, 169).

This article takes up Zeller’s invitation (or challenge) and attempts an analysis of the way in which science and religion are fused in the message of the Raelian movement. The Raelians are a new religion that, stemming

Stefano Bigliardi is an affiliated postdoctoral researcher at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies (CMES), Lund University, Finngatan 16, 223 62, Sweden, and a lecturer in ethics and contemporary philosophy at Tec de Monterrey CSF in Mexico City, Mexico; e-mail: stefano.bigliardi@cme.lu.se.

from the revelations supposedly received by the French Claude Vorilhon (b. 1946) forty years ago, has been explicitly characterized from the very first message and in its initiatives by a constant appeal to “science.” The aim of such examination is threefold. First, I shall deconstruct the religion–science relationship as it is concocted in Raelian revelation describing it through an abstract model *ad hoc*. Second, this model shall be compared with extant ones, elaborated, respectively, by the late Ian Barbour, Mikael Stenmark, Benjamin E. Zeller, and James R. Lewis, a complementary question being: which model seems best suited to fulfil the task at stake? Third, I shall refer to the results thus obtained in order to raise more general questions regarding the possibility of identifying substantial distinctions between the debate over religion and science when it is taken up from the viewpoint of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam and when it is taken up from the viewpoint of a New Religious Movement.

The first section reconstructs the revelation received by Vorilhon/Rael, with a particular emphasis on the first two messages he claims to have heard from the aliens known as Elohim, and a focus on the usage of the term “science” in such messages as well in some Raelian initiatives. The second section proposes a model to describe Rael’s concoction of science and religion; its elements, as well as their mutual interaction, are defined and examined in detail. The third section compares such model with extant ones and tries to establish to what extent the latter can be used to capture the features of Raelianism. In the light of the previous sections the fourth and final one addresses some methodological questions that pertain to the study of the religion–science relationship in new religious movements and traditional religions alike.

#### “SCIENCE MUST BE YOUR RELIGION”: VORILHON/RAEL AND THE ELOHIM’S MESSAGE

This article is not concerned with the sociological aspects of the Raelian movement, nor with those sides of Raelianism that are more liable to be deepened by investigative journalism.<sup>1</sup> I shall therefore limit the reconstruction to the most relevant events preceding, surrounding, and constituting the two successive revelations that Vorilhon claims to have received. We will observe not only that the two revelations complement each other but also that Vorilhon fined-tuned the message over time in response to criticism as well as to technological developments.<sup>2</sup> Raelians’ controversial initiatives shall be recalled here only when relevant to some doctrinal positions illustrated in such reconstruction.

In order to further stress the importance of the present discussion for a journal such as *Zygon* it should be remarked right away that “science,” throughout all of Vorilhon’s texts, is presented as a main exegetical tool and also (synonymously with the term “technology”) as the instrument

through which a “paradise on earth” can be constructed (Vorilhon 1977a, 62); science also ends up being the object of religion itself. “Science,” Vorilhon tells us, “is the most important thing for men [*sic*]. You will keep yourself updated about all the scientists’ discoveries that can solve all the problems (. . .).” Some lines below it becomes clear that science and religion are one and the same thing: “Science must be your religion (. . .) Being a scientist you please your creators, because you act like them and you show that you are aware of being made in their image” (Vorilhon 1977b, 131). In a Marx-flavored exhortation scientists, together with philosophers and artists, are warmly encouraged by Vorilhon to get rid of all those powers that try to manipulate them: “you who have always been exploited and betrayed by political and economic powers that transformed your inventions into deadly weapons and your art into propaganda for their ideologies: It is time to unite!” (Vorilhon 1977b, 107). That being said, I prefer to keep the term “science” between scare quotes since I have not specified yet how its characterization works. This, as I have beforehand stated, will be the object of the second section. Let’s examine in detail, first of all, the wider context in which such teachings emerge.

Vorilhon<sup>3</sup> was born in Vichy, Allier, in 1946 and was raised in Ambert by a single mother. His father was Jewish; his mother, albeit culturally Catholic, preferred to leave him the decision whether to be baptized or not (Vorilhon 1977a, 15 and 23). As a boy, Claude attended Catholic schools and was neither a brilliant student nor very concerned with matters of faith (Vorilhon 1977a, 19–23). He matured a taste for poetry, speed, and autoeroticism early on (Vorilhon 1977a, 19–21). At the age of 15 he headed to Paris where he started working as a singer (Vorilhon 1977a, 24 following). His dream was to become a race-car driver. He became a sports journalist and later, after moving to Clermont-Ferrand, he established his own sports-car magazine. Thanks to the improved financial situation and the contacts that this job brought him he was able to purchase a race-car and fulfill his dream (Vorilhon 1977a, 28–32).

Whereas the basis for such narrative is most likely factual, it should be observed that what Vorilhon narrates about his early life is functional to the construction of his prophetic persona as well as of his doctrine (for instance, the early discovery of masturbation is in line with Rael’s later teachings about sexuality and pleasure). At the same time such events are interpreted through the revelation itself. For instance, Vorilhon describes his modest success as a singer as a sign that he was being prepared for a higher mission (Vorilhon 1977a, 27). Finally, Vorilhon knew other allegedly biographical facts through the revelation itself, such as that he was conceived on December 25, 1945 (Vorilhon 1977a, 15).

Vorilhon claims to have received the first revelation on 13 December 1973. While walking alone in an extinguished volcanic crater next to

Clermont-Ferrand known as Puy de la Vache,<sup>4</sup> he witnessed the landing of a UFO from which emerged a small, human-like, bearded figure, radiant and friendly (Vorilhon 1974, 17–19). On-board the UFO Vorilhon received a revelation from the alien over a time span of six days, articulated in successive meetings that Vorilhon was expected to keep secret (Vorilhon 1974, 23). Part and parcel of such revelation was an exegesis of the Bible, a copy of which he had felt compelled to buy in the days before the encounter and that he was invited to bring along on the second day (Vorilhon 1974, 20 and 23).

The revelation is articulated in a narrative concerning the origin of humanity and the statement of a mission for Vorilhon. The alien presents himself as the exponent of a race called the Elohim, a name translated as “those who came from the sky” (Vorilhon 1974, 30). Such aliens have created humanity (and nature) 25,000 years ago using the Earth as a huge laboratory for biological experiments that they had previously been performing on their planet (Vorilhon 1974, 29). The Elohim themselves had been created in an analogous way by another race of aliens, that also had been created in their turn, in a “transmission” chain whose infinity matches that of the universe in time and space and in which humans are just a “passage” among innumerable others (Vorilhon 1974, 123).

Human beings are to become aware of, and active in, their role in such chain of successive creations. This part of the revelation of course entails that no biological evolution ever existed: the birth of new species was intentionally determined and shaped. Fossils are explained as the remnants of failed or terminated experiments (Vorilhon 1974, 125–27). We are told the Elohim have been monitoring humanity and controlling its development, orienting its growth toward a status of maturity in which the role of creators can be fully and consciously assumed. This has been done through prophets, the last of which is Vorilhon. With the name of Rael, meaning “light/ambassador of the Elohim” (Vorilhon 1974, 127), he shall spread the truth regarding humanity’s origins, invite his fellow humans to correct the social order so to stop inequality and injustice, and promote the construction of an embassy for the aliens in Israel. The completion of such embassy will function as an invitation to the aliens themselves to replicate the encounter that they had with Vorilhon on a worldly scale, the building being the tangible sign that humanity has fully understood where it comes from and where it is heading (Vorilhon 1974, 138–41; Vorilhon 1977a, 87 and 88).

On 7 October 1975, once again while alone and immersed in nature in a place called Roc Plat (Brantôme), Vorilhon was contacted again—this time to be taken to the Elohim’s planet (Vorilhon 1977a, 49 and 50). There he was given more details about the way in which he had been monitored and guided since birth; he met Moses, Elijah, Buddha, and

Mohammed (Vorilhon 1977a, 73 and 74), and he got to know Elohim society in greater detail. After the first revelation we already knew that the Elohim have abolished physical work through technology (Vorilhon 1974, 148) and that they do not marry (Vorilhon 1974, 149). Among the Elohim's favorite ways to enjoy life is sex; albeit sexual intercourse can be finalized to birth they prefer to replicate themselves artificially. Such replication consists in the infusion of consciousness in an artificial body (Vorilhon 1974, 147). This has allowed the Elohim to reach a form of immortality, even if the artificial bodies *per se* are already extremely durable (lasting between 750 and 1,200 years), and immortality proper is reserved to the most intellectually and morally endowed ones (Vorilhon 1974, 147 and 148).

At this point it is important to make a flash-forward in our reconstruction and emphasize that Vorilhon has significantly adjusted over time the doctrine of the consciousness's transferal from a senescent body to a newly created one. At the beginning he only wrote about "biological robots." When in the 1990s cloning became part of the public discourse and ethical debates over it started taking momentum, while science-fiction novels and movies<sup>5</sup> that widely elaborated on the topic mushroomed, Rael claimed that such technique was precisely the one the Elohim had been referring to since the time of the first revelation when explaining how they could reach immortality. Furthermore, in contrast to the perplexities or even the vetoes pronounced by other religions (especially the Catholic Church) against human cloning, Rael presented his own movement as an ideal "home" for those scientists seeking absolute freedom of research and experimentation (Vorilhon 2001).

Such adjustment of the doctrine by Vorilhon, at the same time, caught up with another mainstream, sci-fi-like suggestion typical of the 1990s: consciousness, following transhumanistic suggestions, was described as liable to be "uploaded" on a support that is not necessarily a body replica, but possibly a computer,<sup>6</sup> as it happens with software and hardware (Vorilhon 2001).

In the years 2000–2001, the Raelian movement also managed to attract considerable attention worldwide while advertising collaboration with the company *Clonaid* that, under the direction of the French chemist and Raelian bishop Dr Brigitte Boisselier (b. 1956), allegedly managed to create a human clone—a claim that was actually never supported with any evidence (Palmer 2004, 177–94). In 2003 Boisselier was officially appointed as Rael's successor (Palmer 2004, 124).

Such active adjustments undergone by Vorilhon's discourse about science and technology were complemented by the fact that he dropped other science/technology-related topics while they got obsolete. For instance, in his earlier texts we can read a celebration of television as a form of "planetary consciousness" (Vorilhon 1977a, 64–65) that later on is not

further developed. In more recent texts Vorilhon presents the Internet as a religious experience; he justifies this claim by recalling the etymology of religion, *religare* that is, *linking*, and stating, “Nothing links humanity more than the Internet” (Vorilhon 2001, 69). That “science confirmed Rael’s prophecies” is also blatantly stated by one of the authors of the prefaces to *Yes To Human Cloning* Daniel Chabot, a professor of psychology (Vorilhon 2001, 33). Within the same book, Vorilhon takes up other contemporary technological developments such as genetically modified food, presented as the solution to world hunger (Vorilhon 2001, 57) as well as nanotechnology, that in his opinion will bring about the end of money and labor (Vorilhon 2001, 69).

Returning to the revelations received in the 1970s, the biological machines the Elohim produce are not limited to new bodies for themselves; they include biological, humanoid robots designed to perform different kinds of services functional to the Elohim’s welfare and leisure including sex. Vorilhon witnesses the almost instant creation of a replica of his mother and of himself (Vorilhon 1977a, 70, 75–76). Humans are not only urged to fully and consciously undertake the role of creators of further races, but also to conform to the Elohim’s moral and social standards considered as the best possible. One of the fundamental measures to be taken is the instauration of a “geniocracy,” in which the human beings allowed to vote are those who possess intelligence by 10% over average and even more intelligence is required (50% above average) to assume the power (Vorilhon 1974, 132–34; Vorilhon 1977b, 11). Since the planet of the Elohim is seen as a paradise, the political project to create it on Earth has recently been labeled “paradism” (Vorilhon 1977a, 69).<sup>7</sup>

The Raelian message possesses thus a social reformation plan. But there is also a teaching directed to the single persons: individually, the reward for fully living as the Elohim do is “scientific resurrection,” that is, the infusion of one’s consciousness into an immortal body that replicates that person’s young one. This doctrine justifies two main religious practices promoted by the Raelian movement: the transmission of a person’s “cellular plan” (supposedly unique for each individual and telepathically transmissible) to the Elohim, mediated by Rael himself or by an appointed guide during a special ceremony (Palmer 2004, 58–59), as well as the conservation, in a location in Geneva, of a small portion of frontal bone (extracted between the eyes) of deceased members for the very same goal of facilitating cloning on part of the Elohim (Palmer 2004, 59 and 60).

We learn as well that Vorilhon’s real father was an alien, and that differently from other prophets Rael ushers in an epoch of a direct revelation on part of the Elohim, an epoch that is marked by the explosions of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, from which the years should be counted (Vorilhon 1974, 110 and 111). The reason why Vorilhon has not been endowed with special powers nor does he perform spectacular miracles is

precisely the new “explicitness” of the message: the present one is the age of the apocalypse (i.e., revelation): the Elohim manifest themselves for what they are, and spectacular events of any kind would just distract the people’s attention, running the risk of creating a religion in the old meaning of the term (Vorilhon 1974, 154). It is also specified that France has been chosen as the location of the encounter as a country more open to novel ideas (Vorilhon 1974, 21). Vorilhon is the ideal channel for the message since, being neither a scholar nor a scientist, he would be able to explain it in a simple and clear way (Vorilhon 1974, 22). However, he also eventually felt that his capacities had been artificially enhanced (Vorilhon 1977a, 37).

As I have beforehand stated, five days of the first revelation are dedicated to a “Biblical study” guided by the alien. The Bible is presented as a fundamentally genuine record of human creation and of humanity’s interaction with the Elohim. However, it is also explained that such record has been filtered through the consciousness of authors who were not conceptually equipped to clearly understand and describe the phenomena or events they were witnessing or transcribing (Vorilhon 1974, 30, 65). Therefore, the text has to be unwrapped from its naïve literary aspects, basically understanding that when it refers to God it actually indicates the Elohim, whereas miraculous narratives are nothing but the unsophisticated descriptions of those technological devices (or, in any case, those forms of technological interventions) that the Elohim themselves used in their interaction with humanity, especially through prophets. It is not claimed that the five-day exegesis exhausts all the revelation, but rather suggested that Vorilhon (and, through him, his reader) can continue interpreting the text along the same lines, as well as that other sacred texts contain traces of truth (Vorilhon 1974, 120 and 121; Vorilhon 1977a, 150). However, it is also suggested that a great part of the Bible consists of worthless, uninformative “poetic babblings” (French: *bavardages*—Vorilhon 1974, 30).

In the course of the exegesis we learn about many specific events that fine-tune the main narrative according to which the Elohim created humanity. The prohibition that Adam and Eve received, for instance, was nothing but an attempt at restraining humanity’s knowledge in the fear that an excess would prove detrimental (Vorilhon 1974, 35 and 36). However, it is the detection of technological devices behind reference to highly symbolic Biblical artifacts and events that prevails. Noah’s Ark was nothing but a spaceship used to preserve fauna and flora when the Elohim decided to punish humans for their misdemeanors (Vorilhon 1974, 38–41).<sup>8</sup> Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed with nuclear weapons, as the kind of physical damage suffered by Lot’s wife demonstrates (Vorilhon 1974, 43 and 4). Manna was synthetic food (Vorilhon 1974, 51). Since brains communicate through waves, hair can be used as antennae, and this was both the secret of Samson’s strength as well as the reason of his weakness when his hair was cut (Vorilhon 1974, 58 and 59). The Ark of the Covenant was a device to

communicate with the aliens and those who inappropriately tried to touch or manipulate it electrocuted themselves (Vorilhon 1974, 60). Elijah was taken up in the skies on a flying device (Vorilhon 1974, 65). Likewise, we are told that Jesus's miracles were technological. His walk on water, for instance, was made possible by the action of antigravity rays (Vorilhon 1974, 102). The resurrections were due to extremely advanced medicine (Vorilhon 1974, 96 and 97). The multiplication of the loaves and the fish was brought about through the usage of synthetic food in form of pills (hence according to Vorilhon the similarity with the loaves; Vorilhon 1974, 101). Jesus' parable of the sower is not interpreted in a moral sense but as a metaphorical account of the successive attempts at creating living beings (Vorilhon 1974, 98 and 99). We are told as well that the miracles in Lourdes were technologically performed by the Elohim (Vorilhon 1977a, 82).

In his new role as Rael, Vorilhon managed to establish a religious movement that, undergoing structural and ceremonial modifications and living through various vicissitudes over the years, at the apex of its popularity boasted thousands of adherents (with different hierarchical roles) in the five continents (Palmer 2004, 117–22). A recent article appearing in *Rael Press* (a sort of official bulletin online) reported that Brigitte Boissellier, while celebrating the 40th anniversary of Rael's first encounter with the Elohim, mentioned a global membership of 90,000.<sup>9</sup>

We have already touched upon the "Clonaid affair." We should also recall that similarly, in the 2000s, when the problem of the religious/traditional practice of female genital mutilation and criticism against it began acquiring global visibility, Rael, building upon extant Raelian exaltation of sexual pleasure, started championing the antimutilation cause and boasted the building, in Burkina Faso, of a clitoris reconstructing hospital. Analogously to the cloning initiative and *Clonaid*, this was done through the Raelian-sponsored organization *Clitoraid* that likewise claimed to have some medical doctors on its side; this initiative was also controversial and accused of being only a scam (Strickland 2008).

#### RAEL'S PROGRESSIVE PATRONIZING PARASITISM

If we try to express in general terms how Rael engages with science in his original message and the way he approaches and develops it as we have reconstructed his worldview to this point, we can state that Rael's engagement with science presents three interrelated aspects.

- (i) It is *progressive*. This adjective should *not* be interpreted in a political sense, and it is referred to Rael's (as well as the Raelians') attitude toward scientific debates and technological developments. It simply means that Vorilhon cunningly adjusts his usage of



“science”(technology) in his writings and discourse in order to catch up with those aspects or elements of science that are in the spotlight at the given time in which he is writing and that are generally perceived as the most advanced development or debate that characterizes a given period. Some topics, as we have observed beforehand, are dropped (such as the exaltation of television) while others are picked up. As I have mentioned earlier, this also entails that the appearance of new technology/science *de facto* is assumed as constituting a supplement of revelation, since it is astutely presented as confirming previous parts of the revelation. This dependence on contemporary technology might be interpreted as dependent on Vorilhon’s own understanding of science and technology as a layperson in the very beginning of the revelation, and later on as a deliberate media-savvy strategy.

- (ii) It is *patronizing*. Rael advocates a specific position concerning science’s ethics. This position is the defense of absolute freedom for science and research, and such freedom is presented as the best possible option for scientists and humanity. It is linked to the idea that scientific research, if given free rein, will create paradise on earth. In other words hedonistic materialism provides a general frame in which both science and its freedom are exalted, on the basis of the further assumption according to which science can infallibly and indefinitely improve human life. Scientists are invited to realize their exploitation by superior powers, to get rid of it, and to unite in a supranational entity. Raelianism is thus presented as the “natural home” for science and its message as a liberating one.
- (iii) Finally, Rael’s usage of the term “science” in his texts is *parasitic*. Parasitism in biology indicates a relationship between two living beings one of which benefits at the expense of the other. The parasitism I am referring to is *semantic*. It is important to invite my reader *not* to take such metaphor as necessarily carrying a polemical connotation: what I am trying to construct is simply a parallelism between a natural phenomenon and the way in which the meaning of specific terms emerges or is constructed in Vorilhon’s texts.

Parasitism can be detected at four different yet intertwined levels of Vorilhon’s discourse. (a) The meaning of “science” in Vorilhon’s revelation parasitizes that of “(contemporary) technology,” no distinction being made between the two. (b) The religious message exploits the *prestige* commonly bestowed on science and technology. (c) The religious message exploits the *visibility* of specific science-related debates. (d) Vorilhon’s usage of “science” and “technology” as well as the mention of supposed Elohim devices is simply and generally *parasitic on the notions already entertained by his reader regarding such terms*. Rael indeed hardly specifies an exact meaning

of “science,” nor does he explain in detail all the “scientific” notions he appeals to when clarifying a Biblical passage. For instance, nowhere in his books is an explanation of the basic mechanisms of cloning to be found (not even an oversimplified one), nor does he provide us with the details, say, of the “rays” that supposedly helped Jesus to walk on water, or with an explanation of how the Elohim’s spaceships can travel at a speed faster than light. The understanding of terms such as “science,” “technology,” and science-related or scientific-sounding expressions such as “cloning” is left dependent on Vorilhon’s readers’ previously acquired notions. If a reader entertains a maimed, partial, oversimplified, wrong notion connected with such terms, or even no notion at all, he or she is more likely to swallow Vorilhon’s revelation that is, to consider it convincing.

If we especially focus on the last point we might observe that the semantic parasitism I am talking about is actually twofold, depending on the perspective we assume. If we take the viewpoint of “science” meant as the term used by Rael in his texts, we notice that it parasitizes the notions already entertained by his reader since the texts never present an explicit discussion of this very delicate and rich term. If we focus on the notion of “science” entertained by the reader, taking as a third point of reference a fully fledged, proper concept of science (such as the one to which a reader could be exposed by taking a scientific course or even just reading a book in popular science), we can claim that such notion possibly *diminishes* as Rael draws from it. Precisely as one would find in a host organism infected by a parasite, since the object and method of science (proper) are left unexplained (or at worst, deformed), and so is the ethical dimension of science’s application that Rael lessens by presenting it as univocal and taken for granted. The reader starts with a weak notion and ends up with an even weaker one.

Rael’s writings can be further likened to science fiction. Science fiction is often praised for being ground-breaking and *anticipating* the development of reality. In fact, it usually takes a contemporary, visible scientific/technological debate or topic and amplifies it, imagining a possible development. Hence, for instance, the insistence on cloning and virtual reality in Hollywood in the 1990s, which is paralleled by Vorilhon’s one, whereas one likely does *not* listen to any cloning-related techno-babble, say, in the classical series of *Star Trek*. The most relevant difference between Vorilhon’s writings and science-fictional narratives seems to be that the latter are presented to a readership as entertaining texts, not as revealed truth, and they can thus be enjoyed even by a professional scientist through a voluntary suspension of incredulity. I prefer the metaphorical notion of parasitism since it covers the wide spectrum in which are placed *science fiction* and *pseudoscience*, between which Vorilhon oscillates.

Finally (e) “science” not only acquires its meaning and significance in the parasitic ways just described, but it ends up *replacing* the traditional

religious message of Judeo-Christianity. First, it is used by Vorilhon as an exegetical tool that allegedly allows us to distinguish its true parts from the lyrical “babblings.” Second, it is presented as *the* religious message *tout court*. I have started off building a parallel between the semantic mechanisms of Rael’s texts and the natural phenomenon known as parasitism, and I feel I can now refer to an even more specific manifestation of such phenomenon in order to illustrate a subtle point. Rael’s “science” can be likened to those animals who practice *brood parasitism*, like cuckoos: they not only grow at the expenses of another species’ brood, in whose nest their eggs have been laid, but they also end up evicting the eggs or young of such species from the nest. In this case, what happens is the following: the reader absorbs the term “science” from Rael’s text. Such term is originally empty or incomplete but in its turn it absorbs the features of “science” as it is already characterized in the reader’s set or system of beliefs. Finally, “science” so characterized expels the concept of “religion” from the reader’s beliefs—*de facto* it is taking its place. This, however, only pertains to Rael’s stated *intentions*, since the ethical side of his whole teaching (the aforementioned science patronizing) still is a doctrine *about* science and not stemming *from* it, and, in any case, as the analysis of (a), (b), (c), (d) should have clarified, when Rael touches upon science he is basically doing science fiction or pseudoscience.

My reader has surely noticed that each aspect listed comprises different points, and that they are intertwined; however, the subdivision seems to me still justified. The first one is meant to capture the *dynamic, chronological* development of Vorilhon’s message and it pertains to Rael’s and the Raelians’ *intentions*. The second captures the *ethical* stance Rael takes towards science and technology. The third one describes the *semantics* of such message that, differently from Rael’s intentions, are inscribed in his texts once and for all and do not depend any more on his own intentions and actual exegesis. Progressive adjustments can only be observed if one focuses, comparatively, on the *content* (i.e., the specific references) made by Vorilhon in his writing over time, whereas both Vorilhon’s *ethical stance* toward science and his *semantic parasitism* in the characterization of science *remain constant strategies independently on the specific scientific-technological topic evoked from time to time*.

One more example may help my reader to grasp this point. Over the decades Vorilhon shifts from the vague reference to “cellular patterns” to the more specific one to “cloning,” and that is a change in *content* that demonstrates a certain shrewdness in refreshing the religious message. Constant remains the ethical stance: experimentation, be it on “cellular patterns” or on “genes,” must be given free rein, according to Rael, and all those scientists who agree might find their ideal home and defender in Raelianism. Finally, the usage of such expressions (once again: be they “cellular pattern” or “genes”) is vague and thus semantically parasitic on his reader’s knowledge.

Each one of the aspects I point out can characterize a discourse about science without necessarily entailing the others. A magazine dedicated to scientific popularization has to progressively adjust its content to what is perceived as most updated (of course such publications at the same time socially construct that very impression of up-to-datedness). Freedom of research and science can be advocated universally and *a priori*, and that is as well the case with hedonistic materialism. Finally, semantic parasitism is, as I have pointed out referring to science fiction, first and foremost a narrative technique. By virtue of such aspects, that are thus clearly distinguished, I propose to name the science–religion relationship represented by Raelianism, for short, as *progressive patronizing parasitism*.

Some further points should be stressed in order to make an even stronger case for the adoption of the expression “parasitism” and to avoid misunderstandings. In response to my arguments one might reply that in principle *all* theories and new religious or philosophical approaches make assumptions and build off of what came earlier, yet we do not call them parasitic. It would be considered highly polemical to claim that Islam is a parasite of Christianity, or Christianity a parasite of Judaism, and so on. The point is that Rael’s narrative is *not* just like any other sort of intellectual approach that assumes and transforms existing concepts. The key to understanding this is precisely that *Rael does not present any explicit discussion of such transition*. Whenever a religious or philosophical argument is presented that draws upon a preceding one, we witness some discussion of why the predecessor was wrong or wrongly interpreted according to the author of the new one. Islamic theology argues in detail (and on a Qur’anic basis) why Jesus should be considered a prophet but not divinized; Jehovah’s Witnesses argue in detail why he should not be believed to have died on a cross; Marx explains which elements of Hegel’s philosophy should be adopted and cultivated and which ones should be discarded; so does Schopenhauer with Kant’s epistemology; and the list could continue *ad infinitum*. In the case of the natural sciences whenever a new theory is proposed, be it a transformation of a preceding one or a radical alternative to it, the very transformation and/or the advantages represented by the new theory if compared with the old one are explicitly discussed. Rael hijacks “science” and its “aura” while *de facto* diminishing it and not proposing any thematic shift or change whatsoever: we witness an appropriation and a weakening, not an explicit semantic transition as it happens in respectable intellectual discussion. This should justify my terminological choice and avoid confusion with other phenomena.

These observations confirm some features of Vorillon’s message that have been less systematically pointed out in extant scholarship about Raelianism. Bryan Sentes and Susan J. Palmer expand upon the Raelian cosmology’s “presumed immanence”; the Raelian reading of the Bible, albeit presented as a “demythologization,” actually is according to the

two scholars “a mythologization or mystification of science” (Sentes and Palmer 2000, 101). Christopher Helland remarks, “The scientific component remains as mythic and nonprovable as the original discourse [the Bible], becoming science fiction rather than science” (Helland 2007, 281). Eugene V. Gallagher points out that new religious movements’ effort to catch up with previous revelations “combats the perception that they are wholly novel, and thus potentially unimportant, ephemeral, and dismissible” (Gallagher 2010, 16). Carly Machado writes that “Raelian cosmology is ‘in between’ themes of science fiction, religious desire, scientific innovation and contemporary social question” (Machado 2010, 194); Machado speaks as well of a “sacralization of science” (Machado 2010, 201).

#### OTHER SCIENCE–RELIGION MODELS AND RaelIANISM

Scholars of science and religion are generally keen on elaborating general classifications for their interaction. I shall focus here on four different proposals and apply them to Rael’s message. My reader should soon notice that such application results in two parallel results. On the one hand we shall reach a deeper understanding of the logic behind Rael’s discourse. On the other hand we shall understand in which direction the theoretical frameworks adopted can be further sharpened. In what follows, after a short reconstruction of each model I will directly apply it to Rael’s narrative regarding “science” and explain such narrative accordingly. More general teachings regarding the way in which the models chosen could be improved in their turn shall be explained in the conclusive remarks.

Historically pivotal has been the late Ian Barbour’s identification of four types of relationships between science and religion. According to Barbour’s teaching we have *conflict* when science and religion are seen as making opposed, irreconcilable claims regarding the same domain. *Independence* is the separation of science and religion as distinct domains. *Dialogue* is achieved when those who engage in the discussion of science and religion emphasize the methodological similarities of their respective fields. *Dialogue* also means that science might recognize that the data it uncovers raise questions that can be addressed by religion. *Integration*, finally, is achieved when religion and science cooperate in a systematic metaphysical synthesis (Barbour 2000, 10–34).

If I had to choose which of the three categories adopted by Barbour better describes Rael’s message, I would, at first sight, be oriented towards *integration*: it is rather clear that such message results from a mixture of the religious and the “scientific.” However, integration according to Barbour seems to be rather the result of an explicitly planned intellectual encounter between science and religion, and not just any *concoction* such as the one presented by Rael to his readers. It becomes clear upon closer inspection that reference to Barbour’s integration would entail missing

out on some essential traits of Rael's teaching. First, Barbour's model is generally so static that it ends up being blind to Rael's progressive adjustments. Second, it is not articulated enough to capture the ethical side to his message. Finally, using the category of *integration* we also overlook both Rael's intention to fully *replace* religion with science as well as, more importantly, Rael's *de facto* reformulation of science that emerged while analyzing Rael's *semantic parasitism*. Integration cannot even be said to be Rael's declared intention since religion and science are presented as coinciding (emphasis being of course on the latter). Thus, we should rather consider the result or the logic behind Rael's claims and not the surface. Once more: what supposedly replaces religion, in Rael's discourse, is rather a *mixture* of science fiction and pseudoscience. Let us focus on this latter term. It should be pointed out that, if one takes as a point of reference mainstream science or science proper—that is science in which the reality of biological evolution is taken for granted—then Rael's choice to subscribe to creationism (albeit a creationism of a very special kind) ends up characterizing his teaching, in Barbour's terms, as a religion–science *conflict*. However, all in all one is left with a feeling that Barbour's typology is still not fine-grained enough to capture the nuances of Raelianism.

Mikael Stenmark has likewise identified four main ways in which religion and science can interact. (1) According to the *irreconcilability model*, science and religion cannot be harmonized while remaining as they are: they make competitive claims over the same territory, meaning that only one of the two will ultimately gain the upper hand. (2) According to the *reconciliation* (or *contact*) *model* science and religion can coexist while being combined. (3) According to the *independence model* science and religion are compatible due to the fact that they never compete and remain separate. (4) Finally, the *replacement model* states that science might expand up to the point of becoming the new religion (Stenmark 2010, 278–80).<sup>10</sup>

Four more submodels further enrich this analysis. Bearing in mind the idea that religions can have more conservative or liberal versions, Stenmark identifies four more models of reconciliation: a *conservative reconciliation*, according to which *science* needs to change; a *traditional reconciliation*, where science and religion might need a change up to a certain extent (with the latter's central claims left untouched). The *liberal reconciliation* model implies religion as in need of a major overhaul. Finally, a *postmodern* or *constructivist* reconciliation demands radical changes for both religion and science (Stenmark 2010, 287–90).

It is to be observed that Stenmark (who presents his model as “multidimensional”) also pays particular attention to distinguishing four different dimensions on which religion and science can interact: (Science-1) problem-stating; (Science-2) development; (Science-3) results justification phase; (Science-4) application (Stenmark 2004, 215).

Stenmark's model seems slightly more powerful than Barbour's one to describe Rael's teaching. Indeed, a *replacement* of religion with science seems to be what such teaching is all about. However, this replacement is only *claimed* and *ostensible*. It is claimed because, as I have already emphasized, there remains in Rael's doctrine significant moral teachings (freedom of research, hedonism) that still pertain to the field of religious or ethical doctrines and not science proper. Also, such replacement is *ostensible* because, as the analysis of semantic parasitism has highlighted, when Rael speaks of science he is in fact doing science fiction and pseudoscience; in the light of this last observation, and adopting Stenmark's language, one might say that Rael advocates a *postmodern replacement*, yet the expression might sound too "ennobling" to some critics.

Benjamin E. Zeller's typology is modeled on the three new religious movements that he studies, and which we have mentioned at the beginning: the Unification Church, the Hare Krishna Movement, and Heaven's Gate. The first one represents the attempt at guiding science toward religiously established goals; on the one hand science and religion are presented as separated spheres, on the other hand science's "ethical boundaries, methods, and even research goals" are conceived as religion-guided. The second one distillates an approach aimed at replacing mainstream science with an alternative scientific system. The third one, finally, tries to absorb the methodology of science into the religious system itself (Zeller 2010, 165). Rael's approach seems to bear at least some family resemblances towards such types. It does indeed aim at guiding science after establishing that science itself can create paradise on Earth in the light of a hedonistic discipline. It also constructs an alternative science (if we want to generously label in this way the science fiction/pseudoscience he uses). However, if we only adopt Zeller's description we still overlook the astute progressive adaptation performed by Rael, as well as the details of the whole science fictional construction.

James R. Lewis similarly worked on new religious movements, singling out possible ways in which science is used by them as a source of legitimation (exploiting a prestige that, in its turn, partly but significantly depends on the perception of science itself as the most solid form of knowledge possible, and as a problem-solving activity). *In nuce*, the strategies are: (i) *terminological/rhetorical*, when traditional religion and practices are described as "scientific"; (ii) *methodological*, when religion engages in a systematic research, for instance spiritual; (iii) related to a *worldview*, when religion incorporates science; (iv) related to *empirical research on religious practices*, when they are encouraged or emphasized so that the religion, being itself the object of a scientific investigation, seems to be scientific *per se*; (v) the development of (allegedly) *alternative science*; (vi) usage of *paratechnology*; (vii) *academic*, when emphasis is placed on those religion members who hold PhDs or in general can boast academic

credentials. This typology is presented by Lewis as provisional and the strategies are not mutually exclusive (Lewis 2010, 19 and 20). Lewis very briefly touches upon Raelianism as well, stating that its approach to science is a good instance of the third strategy (Lewis 2010, 18 and 19).

I am however inclined to envisage in Raelianism signs of the presence of other strategies as well: it is indeed *rhetorically scientific*; it does *de facto* construct a specific and *alternative science*, both ethically and content-wise (hedonistic, optimistic positivism plus alien-related creationism); it employs *paratechnology*, for instance with the practice of the frontal bone extraction (i.e., such practice can well be mechanical and surgically accurate, but there is of course no scientific guarantee that it will facilitate the subject's resurrection); finally, it also emphasizes the academic credentials of some prominent members or believers such as Brigitte Boisselier, as well as other authors of the prefaces to *Yes to Human Cloning*, or the medical doctors allegedly siding with the aforementioned *Clitoraid* programme.

#### CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The time has come to draw some general remarks regarding Raelianism and its approach to science, as well as the models that we have applied to it. Benjamin E. Zeller, as we have observed at the beginning, has invited his fellow scholars to take new religious movements seriously not only as sociological phenomena but also as to their teachings. Raelianism is a new religious movement that often presents, both in the behavior of its founder and members, as well as in its teaching, controversial and (to be quite frank) preposterous sides. However, studying Raelianism still seems to be a worthwhile critical exercise. The identification of the *specific strategies* through which it mixes religion and science is relevant not only in order to understand what exactly is criticizable in Raelianism, but also in order to fine-tune science–religion interaction models that then can be applied to any other similar attempt. In other words, an attempt at studying the doctrine of a new religious movement does not necessarily entail ennobling it, and it has critical relevance both with regards to the specific movement and the study of the science religion debate in general.

In particular, we have discovered that several critical tools need to be adopted, or sharpened. The existence of a *progressive adaptation* strategy in Rael, whose detection is of course eased by the fact that the revelation is well circumscribed in content and time, reminds us of the relevance of the *diachronic dimension* of any teaching about religion and science that needs to be taken into account. The existence of a *patronizing doctrine* about science in Rael reminds us that one should well distinguish between the discussion of the possible reconciliation between scientific and religious *concepts* and the religiously oriented discussion of *practical guidelines* to science. Finally, the fine-tuned analysis of how the meaning of “science” is



constructed by Rael points, in my opinion, at two general teachings. First of all, it is important not to take the meaning of “science” by any author for granted; it is wise, instead, to examine through which concrete conceptual associations such term is characterized in his or her writings, besides and beyond that very author’s stated intentions. A category like Stenmark’s *replacement*, for instance, acquires a completely different meaning if the author subscribes to mainstream science or if by “science” he or she means “science fiction” and/or creationism, or any other form of pseudoscience as Rael does. This leads us to a second, more general lesson: in terms of critical sharpness, the most fruitful analytical exercise is most likely a *bottom-up* one, such as those elaborated by Zeller and Lewis (and in this article), that is, an examination in which the description of a general model emerges from the atomistic analysis of an author’s texts. This is opposed to a *top-down* analysis, such as Barbour’s and Stenmark’s, in which one first enunciates general categories and then tries to understand whether specific teachings fall into them. However, Stenmark also seems to be on the right track when, instead of tracing a “flat” map, he highlights the (co)existence of several dimensions on which, in the same model, science and religion can interact.

I would like to conclude on an even more general note. Some of the features of Rael’s doctrine I have identified and labeled might seem negatively connoted. This might depend on my specific terminological choices (“patronizing”, “science fiction”) but also on a reader’s assumption of Raelianism’s lack of seriousness, due to its extravagant, preposterous, or even fraudulent initiatives and ideas. However, we should make an effort to assume the result of the analysis of such features as a neutral, analytical tool liable to be applied to other doctrines. It would be far-fetched to deny deep differences between the position of someone who writes about religion and science by assuming the viewpoint of, say, Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, and one who writes from the viewpoint of a new religion including, conversely, between the position of the scholars who respectively examine such theories. The emergence of a new religion’s science-related concepts, for instance, is contemporary with or follows the very science it purports to refer to. Furthermore, the science–religion relationship as it emerges in a new religious movement can be said to be more explicit and better circumscribed (and, if one does not subscribe to the idea of a divine revelation, more intentionally concocted) than the one of a traditional religion. However, we should ask ourselves whether, given such differences, the analytical categories through which the science–religion interaction in the two cases is studied should be essentially different. Are strategies such as the progressive adjustment of scriptural exegesis according to technological advancement, the usage of science fiction while apparently discussing science, or legitimizing strategies such as those identified by Lewis, an exclusive feature of new religious movements? It seems safe to assume that

such question can be answered in the negative, and it is left to future research to fully elucidate the consequences of such an observation.<sup>11</sup>

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I was inspired to write this paper while attending the International CESNUR Conference *The Vitality of New Religions: Thinking Globally, Existing Locally*, Baylor University, Waco, Texas, June 4-8, 2014. I warmly thank Susan J. Palmer and Benjamin E. Zeller as well as two anonymous reviewers for their patient and precious advice. These pages are dedicated to Laura Memo.

#### NOTES

1. The most comprehensive study of Raelianism is Palmer (2004).
2. When I refer to the French edition of a book by Vorilhon the translation to English is mine.
3. One might consider Rael's identity a result of the textual process stemming from Vorilhon's narrative and thus prefer referring to the latter. In this article, I use the two names as interchangeable.
4. It should be remarked that this indication has been revised in later versions of the narrative; later on the encounter was reported to have taken place at another volcanic crater outside of Clermont-Ferrand, Puy de Lassolas, that Vorilhon in his second book (incorrectly) spelled Puy-de-la-Sola (Vorilhon 1977a, 33; Vorilhon 1998, 18). This does not have any bearing on the argument that will be made, yet it seems worth mentioning especially since I shall be emphasizing the importance of a diachronic dimension in analyzing Raelian narratives. *The Final Message* (Vorilhon 1998) conflates Vorilhon's first two books. It is introduced with a Foreword by the British journalist and author Anthony Grey (pp. 9–15) and concluded with a Postscript written by Vorilhon himself (pp. 197–201). The two craters are distinct but connected. The reason for that inconsistency or inaccuracy, which obviously can be used by detractors to criticize Vorilhon's message, escapes the author of these pages. Perhaps it can simply be explained as a slip of Vorilhon's memory, or as a genuine confusion, at the time of the revelation, between the two locations. However one should be fair and point out that (i) the mistake was remarked and corrected by Vorilhon himself and that (ii) any kind of confusion, whenever it occurred (was Vorilhon wrong at the time of the encounter or did he err in a later report and decided to stick to the new version?), cannot be counted among the factors that may weaken the credibility of the encounter itself. In ordinary life one need not always be able to identify and remember a present or past location with the utmost accuracy, and arguably an alien encounter is liable to distract a contactee's attention from other extrinsic details. For an example of systematic debunking of the mistakes (logical and scientific) in Rael's message as well as criticisms of his behavior and of Raelian policies, one can peruse the blog <http://raelian-truth.blogspot.mx/>. This is, more specifically, the page criticizing the mistake concerning the location of the first encounter: <http://raelian-truth.blogspot.mx/2012/01/puy-de-la-vache-puy-de-lassola-puy-de.html>.
5. Archetypal and immensely influential in this sense was Steven Spielberg's film *Jurassic Park* (1993), based on Michael Crichton's novel with the same title (1990). It is to be noted that the undertone carried by Spielberg's movie, as well as by numerous, analogous ones (and by Crichton's novel), is *cautionary*; in other words, movies usually exploit as narrative devices (and simultaneously warn against) the *risks* and *unpredictability* of cloning (albeit cloning in such contexts can be represented, from a technical point of view, in a deeply far-fetched, flawed, or oversimplified way). Notwithstanding the existence of other, previous movies that touch upon the topic, *Jurassic Park* might be considered, by virtue of its global success, a *terminus post quem*, after which reference to cloning in movies started being adopted as a narrative device, "scientifically" justifying and/or allowing the presence of a character's *Doppelgänger* or his/her resurrection. This device started proliferating also in the narratives connected to classical movies or TV series such as *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*.

6. Pivotal in such sense are, among others, the movies *The Lawnmower Man* (Brett Leonard, 1992; loosely based on a tale by Stephen King) and *The Matrix* (Lana and Andy Wachowski, 1999). As I have beforehand emphasized while mentioning *Jurassic Park*, such movies were far from carrying optimistic or triumphalist undertones about the kind of technology they creatively elaborated upon, rather pointing at its possible degeneration and manipulative usage.

7. Cf. also <http://fr.raeliannews.org/news.php?item.406.6>

8. It is to be noted that the Elohim themselves were not always aware of the fact they had been created: this awareness rather came after the deluge (actually a nuclear devastation) when they also decided they would never attempt any more destruction of humanity (Vorilhon 1974, 41).

9. See <http://www.raelpress.org/news.php?item.346.1>. Concerning the role of women in the movement, as well as Rael's philosophy of sexuality (only briefly touched upon here), one can profitably peruse Palmer (1995).

10. Such initial, fourfold typology does not seem to be nuanced enough to Stenmark, and he continues to discuss further cases. The reconciliation or contact model can be elaborated and developed into a *reformative view*. *Reformative* means that one of the two fields should be reformulated. Depending on which of the two has to undergo a change under the impact of the other's doctrines, there can thus be a *religion-priority reformative view*, or a *science-priority reformative view* (Stenmark 2010, 280–82). However, the fact that *both* science and religion need to change and whether religion (or science) should undergo minor changes or a major overhaul it is not excluded; therefore, both views can be held in a *weak* or a *strong* framework (Stenmark 2010, 283). Yet *reconciliation*, according to Stenmark, can be seen in a different guise. Science and religion can namely be reconciled, endorsing that one can support or confirm the other; we then have the *supportive model* that can be combined with the reformative one(s) and all the possible intersections that could hold in *strong* or *weak* contexts (Stenmark 2010, 284 and 285).

11. However, even the answer to such question might be influenced by (or bring grist to the mill of) a specific position in the science–religion debate. For instance, claiming that, when religion and science are discussed we are in any case witnessing a more or less explicit attempt at legitimizing the former, it might appeal to the advocates of a complete separation between the two and be especially welcomed by the advocates of scientism in order to claim that any attempt at reconciling the two only has rhetorical value. In their turn, the advocates of any kind of reconciliation between science and religion might answer that the advocates of scientism try to legitimate philosophical ideas through the canopy of science and so forth.

## REFERENCES

- Barbour, Ian G. 2000. *When Science Meets Religion*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Gallagher, Eugene V. 2010. "Extraterrestrial Exegesis: The Raelian Movement as a Biblical Religion." *Nova Religio* 14(2):14–33.
- Helland, Christopher. 2007. "The Raelian Creation Myth and the Art of Cloning: Reality or Rhetoric?" In *Alien Worlds: Social and Religious Dimensions of the UFO Phenomenon*, ed. Dianne Tumminia, 275–99. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Lewis, James R. 2010. "The Science Canopy: Religion, Legitimacy, and the Charisma of Science." *Temenos. Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 46(1):7–29.
- Machado, Carly. 2010. "Science, Fiction, and Religion: About Rael and Raelian Possible Worlds." In *Religions of Modernity: Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital*, ed. Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman, 187–204. Leiden: Brill.
- Palmer, Susan J. 1995. "Women in the Raelian Movement: New Religious Experiments in Gender and Authority." In *The Gods Have Landed. New Religions from Other Worlds*, ed. James R. Lewis, 105–35. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- . 2004. *Aliens Adored: Rael's UFO Religion*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Sentes, Bryan, and Susan J. Palmer. 2000. "Presumed Immanent: The Raelians, UFO Religions, and the Postmodern Condition." *Nova Religio* 4(1):86–105.
- Stenmark, Mikael. 2004. *How to Relate Science and Religion: A Multidimensional Model*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans.
- . 2010. "Ways of Relating Science and Religion." In *The Cambridge Companion to Science and Religion*, ed. Peter Harrison, 278–93. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Strickland, Eliza. 2008. "Raelians Rocket from Clones to Clitorises." *Wired*, February 19. Available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20100213070438/>, <http://www.wired.com/science/discoveries/news/2008/02/hospital>
- Vorilhon, Claude [Rael]. 1974. *Le livre qui dit la vérité. J'ai rencontré un extra terrestre*. Clermont-Ferrand, France: L'Édition du Message.
- . 1977a. *Les extra-terrestres m'ont emmené sur leur planète. Le 2ème message qu'ils m'ont donné*. Clermont-Ferrand, France: L'Édition du Message.
- . 1977b. *Geniocracy: Government of the People, for the People, by the Geniuses*. Translated by Marcus Wenner and Eva Ponty in 2008. Unknown location: Nova Distribution.
- . 1998. *The Final Message*. London: The Tagman Press.
- . 2001. *Yes to Human Cloning: Eternal Life Thanks to Science*. Translated by Marcus Wenner. Vaduz, Liechtenstein: The Raelian Foundation.
- Zeller, Benjamin E. 2010. *Prophets and Protons: New Religious Movements and Science in Late Twentieth-Century America*. New York: New York University Press.