

**Spaced Out: A group that believes life on earth was created by aliens claims to have made the first human clone. Who are the Raelians and where are they hiding 'Eve'?** Article by: *Jerry Adler*.

Two thousand years ago a Judean carpenter changed the course of history by offering humanity a path to eternal life. About a week ago a French-born sometime journalist and race-car driver who calls himself Rael tried to do the same thing when his followers announced they had solved the mysteries of human cloning. This was the high point of Rael's second career as a savior, which began when he was taken aboard an alien spaceship and transported to a faraway planet whose inhabitants, the Elohim, had created all life on Earth.

For most of the past three decades Rael has been on a mission to replace outmoded religious bunkum with modern, scientific bunkum. "Science is love!" he grandly proclaimed last week in an interview with NEWSWEEK at his Canadian compound--UFOland--near the Vermont border. Soon, he promises, people will be able to make exact genetic copies of themselves, grow them instantaneously to the prime of life and then download all their accumulated memories and traits into the new bodies--the ideal solution for people who want to live forever but find Christianity so... unscientific.

In this contest of beliefs, the edge has to go to Christianity, and not just because it numbers 2 billion adherents against 55,000 Raelians. The claims of the former have never been verified by science, but they were meant to be taken on faith in any case. But Raelian Bishop Brigitte Boisselier, the director of the Raelian-backed company Clonaid, had promised to provide unambiguous scientific proof of an announcement otherwise conspicuously devoid of information: that unnamed researchers in an unidentified country had implanted a cloned embryo in an anonymous woman--who had delivered a baby girl "we call Eve, between us."

That claim could easily be checked by comparing the baby's DNA to the donor's. (In this case, the donor was the mother herself, although in theory it could have been anyone.) A science journalist, Michael Guillen, formerly of ABC News, had been enlisted to oversee the testing by independent researchers. But by the end of last week, Rael himself implied the testing might be abandoned out of concern for the unnamed family's "privacy." After a brief appearance at Boisselier's press conference, Guillen disappeared from public view--and as of last Friday, associates said, he still hadn't seen any cell samples. "If the samples aren't available by next week," someone close to Guillen told NEWSWEEK, "Michael is going to walk away from this thing." On Saturday, a Raelian spokesman in the Netherlands announced the birth of a second cloned baby, to a lesbian couple. DNA testing wasn't mentioned.

If reporters suspended their accustomed skepticism toward people who believe in visits from aliens, it was because the possibility of human cloning long ago left the realm of science fiction. With varying degrees of hope and trepidation, scientists, theologians and

other interested parties--such as infertile couples and the parents of children who had died in accidents--had been awaiting just such an announcement ever since the first mammal, Dolly the sheep, was cloned in 1996. The same technique, scientists say, could easily be applied to humans. Technicians remove the genetic material from an egg cell and replace it with DNA from a donor, then grow the embryo in a petri dish until it's ready to be implanted, by the same process routinely used in fertilization clinics. Human cloning, says Rudolf Jaenisch, an MIT biologist, "is not a problem of technology, but principle." Only two other laboratories in the world have acknowledged pursuing reproductive cloning in humans. The head of one of them, the well-known Italian fertility expert Severino Antinori, has said he expects to have a baby born this month--which skeptics suggested might have had something to do with the timing of Clonaid's announcement.

Thus the Raelians remarkably managed to unite both theologians and scientists in outrage. Whether true or not, "the very attempt to **clone** a human being is evil," pronounced Stanley M. Hauerwas, a professor of theological ethics at Duke University. "That the allegedly cloned child is to be called Eve confirms the God-like stature these people so desperately seek." On a less exalted level of concern, researchers cautioned that the rate of serious birth defects in cloned animals is as high as one in four or five, a grossly unacceptable risk to take with human beings. "I would like to see the world stop blathering about playing God and focus on the risks to the child," said Lou Hawthorne, CEO of Genetic Savings & **Clone**, a California firm that is trying to become the first to **clone** dogs, for people who want to perpetuate their pets. "What about human suffering? That's what the Raelians haven't addressed."

Scientists' biggest concern was that the Clonaid extravaganza would give impetus to the demand by some in Congress for a sweeping ban on research involving any cloning of human embryos. By employing the same techniques of nuclear transfer, but stopping the process short of implantation, researchers can produce embryonic stem cells that can develop into any of the 200-odd kinds of tissue found in the human body. This technique has been used in animals to repair damaged nerves, hearts and kidneys, and could hold the key to treatments for conditions as diverse as heart disease, Parkinson's and crippling spinal-cord injuries. The uncompromising right-wing position against research on embryos is "unfathomable to me," says Dr. Robert Lanza, medical director of Advanced Cell Technology, a biotech firm in Worcester, Mass. "Who wouldn't want to alleviate a lifetime of suffering if one could do it with a microscopic ball of cells?"

Lanza's nightmare is to be lumped in with the Raelians', who also claim to want to alleviate suffering through science. Early on, they managed to strike the deepest vein of pain known to humankind, the grief of a parent for a dead child. Clonaid, founded in 1997 to sell cloning services to all comers, was funded to the tune of several hundred thousand dollars by a West Virginia couple whose 10-month-old son had died during heart surgery. The couple pulled out in 2001, telling reporters that Boisselier appeared more interested in getting Raelism into the newspapers than setting up an actual laboratory. Since then, information on the company's operations has been almost impossible to come by; Boisselier, tracked down in an unidentified European country last week, agreed to a telephone interview but ended it before answering any questions, claiming she couldn't hear properly on her cell phone. Thomas Kaenzig, a vice president, let slip that the Clonaid

staff numbered "between five and 20 people," but explained that the secrecy was necessary for protection from death threats by "wacko religious zealots."

Raelians never cease to be amazed by the crazy things some people believe, like the creation account in Genesis, or, for that matter, Darwinian evolution. "I came across this hypothesis of creation by alien beings," Kaenzig explained, "and this was the most rational explanation of the origin of life here on earth." One of Rael's first lessons from the aliens, when he boarded their spaceship in central France in 1973, was that for thousands of years Jews and Christians had been mistranslating the very first line of the Bible. The Hebrew word "Elohim," he maintains, rendered as "God," is actually a plural noun meaning "those who come from the sky." (The Hebrew ending "-im" does usually indicate a plural, Rabbi David Israel of Yeshiva University said last week, but there are exceptions--and anyway, "Elohim" takes a singular verb.) Rael's self-proclaimed mission is to tear down "the myth of God," which is the major obstacle to world peace. "Telling people to fly planes into buildings--this is God at work," he told NEWSWEEK, referring to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. His other major goal is to construct a \$10 million "embassy" to receive the aliens when they return to earth in the near future. He would like it to be in Israel, he says, but the Israelis haven't shown much interest.

Rael actually stands in a crowded tradition of prophets who saw salvation in a flying saucer, a phenomenon observed by Carl Jung as far back as the 1940s. University of Southern California professor emeritus Robert S. Ellwood, an authority on UFO religions, says Jung called aliens "technological angels," a way for people to put their comforting belief in higher beings into a scientific context. "I don't want to sound too cynical," Ellwood ventures cautiously, "but it does seem like relatively few people base their religious beliefs on pure reason."

In the abstract, as Ellwood and other theologians like to point out, the claims of UFO cults aren't inherently less believable than those of some established religions; the difference is the cultural context. People attracted to fringe beliefs sometimes do strange things, like the 39 followers of the Heaven's Gate cult who committed suicide in 1997, preparing for an ascent in an alien spacecraft. The consensus of those who've studied Rael, though, is that he's probably having too much fun on earth to want to leave it. "He's a playboy and a sportsman and a social satirist," says Susan Palmer, a professor at Dawson College in Montreal and the author of a forthcoming book on the Raelians. "He's having the time of his life." Ordinary Raelians, she says, seem generally happy enough; they don't live in communes, they don't collect weapons and they are taught to abstain from drugs. Their apocalyptic vision is uncommonly benign, and involves training a cadre of attractive young women (Rael's "Order of Angels") to welcome the aliens when they return, sometime before 2035. Raelian gatherings are sometimes conducted in the nude, says Palmer, and it is believed that the aliens want to see humans enjoying themselves. "The only harm they do," Palmer says, "is to their marriages."

And His Holiness Rael, as journalists are required to address him, relaxes in UFOland in his gleaming space suit, appearing to enjoy the onslaught of media attention. Sweeping away the epistemological quibbling over "Eve's" actual existence--"I told [Boisselier], keeping the baby with the mother is more important than proving to the world that you did it"--Rael declares that the

cloning of a human baby "is just a step" toward his ultimate goal. "I'm here to give humanity eternal life," he proclaims. It's a promise, history reveals, that humanity could never resist.