4/12/09 THESKEPTICARENA.COM

RAËLIANS

A RAËLIAN IS A FOLLOWER OF RAËL, A FRENCHMAN AND FORMER MOTOR SPORT JOURNALIST AND RACE-CAR DRIVER WHOSE PARENTS, THE VORILHONS, CALLED HIM CLAUDE WHEN HE WAS BORN IN 1946. HE CLAIMS THAT ON DECEMBER 13, 1973, HE WAS IN A VOLCANO NEAR CLERMONT-FERRAND, FRANCE, WHEN HE SAW A UFO "7 METERS IN DIAMETER MADE OF A VERY SHINY SILVER METAL AND MOVING IN A TOTAL SILENCE." HE SAYS A RADIANT BEING EMERGED AND ENTRUSTED HIM WITH A MESSAGE REVEALING THE TRUE ORIGIN OF MANKIND. THEY TOLD HIM THAT HENCEFORTH HE WOULD BE KNOWN AS RAËL, WHICH MEANS "MESSENGER."

HIS FOLLOWERS CONSIDER HIM TO BE "THE PROPHET OF THE THIRD MILLENNIUM." LIKE ALL GOOD RELIGIOUS LEADERS, RAËL EXPECTS HIS FOLLOWERS TO SUPPORT HIM. A 10% TITHE IS THE NORM.

HE EXPLAINS HIS MISSION IN HIS BOOK, THE TRUE FACE OF GOD. ACCORDING TO TARAS GRESCOE OF SALON.COM, VORILHON CLAIMS THAT

HE WAS TAKEN TO THE PLANET OF THE ELOHIM IN A FLYING SAUCER IN 1975, WHERE HE WAS INTRODUCED TO NOTED EARTHLINGS SUCH AS JESUS, BUDDHA, JOSEPH SMITH AND CONFUCIUS. THE ELOHIM, SMALL HUMAN-SHAPED BEINGS WITH PALE GREEN SKIN AND ALMOND EYES, WERE APPARENTLY THE ORIGINAL INSPIRATION FOR THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN GOD. THEY INFORMED VORILHON THAT HE WAS THE FINAL PROPHET -- SENT TO RELAY A MESSAGE OF PEACE AND SENSUAL MEDITATION TO HUMANKIND UNDER HIS NEW NAME OF RAËL -- BEFORE THE ELOHIM WOULD RETURN TO JERUSALEM IN 2025.

RAËL CLAIMS THAT THE ELOHIM HAVE TAUGHT HIM THAT THE HUMAN RACE WAS CREATED FROM THE DNA OF ALIENS SOME 25,000 YEARS AGO. (IN FACT, ALL LIFE ON EARTH WAS CREATED IN ALIEN LABORATORIES.) AMONG OTHER THINGS, RAËL HAS ALSO LEARNED THAT CLONING IS THE WAY TO IMMORTALITY AND THERE IS NO GOD OR SOUL. ACCORDING TO RAËL, OUR ALIEN CREATORS WANT US TO BE BEAUTIFUL AND SEXY AND ENJOY A SENSUOUS LIFE, FREE FROM THE RESTRICTIONS OF TRADITIONAL JUDEO-CHRISTIAN MORALITY.

ACCORDING TO GRESCOE, "RAËL'S SUCCESS SEEMS TO DERIVE FROM PROVIDING A STRUCTURED ENVIRONMENT FOR DECADENT BEHAVIOR: HE OFFERS A NO-GUILT PLAYGROUND FOR HEDONISM AND SEXUAL EXPERIMENTATION." FORTUNATELY, THE RAËLIANS ARE BIG ON USING CONDOMS. THEY WON'T SPREAD AS MUCH DISEASE THAT WAY. HOWEVER, USING CONDOMS WON'T SUFFICE TO DEPLETE THEIR NUMBERS, RAËL BELIEVES, SINCE HE HAS FORMED A CLONING COMPANY CALLED CLONAID WHICH PROMISES TO

PROVIDE ASSISTANCE TO WOULD BE PARENTS WILLING TO HAVE A CHILD CLONED FROM ONE OF THEM. THIS SERVICE OFFERS A FANTASTIC OPPORTUNITY TO PARENTS WITH FERTILITY PROBLEMS OR HOMOSEXUAL COUPLES TO HAVE A CHILD CLONED FROM ONE OF THEM.

SCIENTISTS SAY THAT THERE IS NO POSSIBILITY OF CLONAID ACTUALLY WORKING IN THE NEAR FUTURE AND DISMISS ITS GOALS AS PURE FANTASY. HOWEVER, CLONAID SHOULD BE A REMINDER OF WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN IN THE DISTANT FUTURE IF CONTROLS ON GENETIC ENGINEERING ARE NOT DEVELOPED TO PREVENT RELIGIOUS FANATICS AND LUNATICS FROM GAINING MORE CONTROL OF THE PLANET THAN THEY ALREADY HAVE.

THE RAËLIAN HEADQUARTERS ARE IN MONTREAL BUT THE CULT IS INTERNATIONAL AND CLAIMS TO HAVE SOME 50,000 MEMBERS IN 85 COUNTRIES. THEY HAVE AN "EVIDENCE PAGE" ON THEIR WEB SITE WHERE THEY OFFER PROOF OF THEIR PROPHET'S CLAIMS, THUS RELIEVING US OF THE BURDEN OF HAVING TO BELIEVE ON PURE FAITH. UNFORTUNATELY, THE EVIDENCE PROVIDED IS LIKELY TO SATISFY ONLY THOSE EAGER FOR DELUSION AND SELF-DECEPTION. FOR EXAMPLE, THE HISTORICAL EVIDENCE IS OF THE TYPE VELIKOVSKY, VON DÄNIKEN AND OTHER MYTHO-HISTORIANS HAVE PROVIDED: THEY TAKE ANCIENT LEGENDS, STORIES, AND RELIGIOUS TEXTS, AND FIT THEM INTO THEIR PRECONCEIVED THEORY. THE RAËLIANS ALSO CONSIDER UFO SIGHTINGS AS PROOF OF THEIR MESSENGER'S CLAIMS.

THEIR ATTEMPT AT "SCIENTIFIC" EVIDENCE WILL HAVE SOME APPEAL TO THE SCIENTIFICALLY ILLITERATE AND THE LOGICALLY-CHALLENGED. THE SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE IS NOTHING MORE THAN SPECULATION AND ASSUMPTION IN JUXTAPOSITION TO FACTS. THEIR EVIDENCE CONSISTS OF CLAIMING THAT WE ARE ABOUT TO CREATE LIFE IN OUR LABORATORIES AND OUR CREATIONS WILL PROBABLY THINK WE ARE GODS. THEREFORE, IT IS REASONABLE TO CONCLUDE THAT WE WERE CREATED IN LABORATORIES AND THINK OF OUR CREATORS AS GODS. THE REST OF THE "SCIENTIFIC" EVIDENCE CONSISTS OF A LIST OF SCIENTIFIC ACCOMPLISHMENTS WHICH, I SUPPOSE, ARE IMAGINED TO HAVE TO HAVE OCCURRED ELSEWHERE BEFORE THE LIVING THINGS ON OUR PLANET COULD HAVE BEEN CREATED IN THE LAB. ALL OF WHICH BEGS THE QUESTION AS TO WHETHER THIS OCCURRED ELSEWHERE 25,000 YEARS AGO.

APPARENTLY, THE RAËLIANS ARE NOT BOTHERED BY THE RATHER ABSURD IMAGE OF A RACE OF SUPERIOR BEINGS WORKING FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS IN A LABORATORY TO CREATE ALL OUR INSECTS, FUNGI, BACTERIA, VIRUSES, ETC., NOT TO MENTION ALL THEIR LOVELIES THAT HAVE GONE EXTINCT. WHY WOULD ANY BEINGS DO SUCH A THING? AND WHY WOULD THEY WAIT 25,000 YEARS TO REVEAL THEIR HANDIWORK TO A FRENCH RACE CAR DRIVER WHO SPOTS THEIR UFO IN A VOLCANO? AND THEN TELL HIM THAT THE MESSAGE IS TO CLONE OURSELVES SO WE CAN BE IMMORTAL. THEN AGAIN, IS THIS STORY ANY STRANGER THAN THE ONES IN THE BIBLE?

THE KICKER IN THEIR ARGUMENT IS THEIR PROOF THAT EVOLUTION COULD NOT HAVE OCCURRED. THEY CLAIM SCIENTISTS HAVE DISCOVERED THAT GENES HAVE A DNA REPAIR MECHANISM (P53) WHICH PREVENTS MUTATION, AN IMPORTANT PROCESS IN EVOLUTION. SPECIES COULDN'T HAVE DIVERSIFIED IF THIS MECHANISM WERE PRESENT. P53 WAS AT FIRST THOUGHT TO BE AN ONCOGENE BUT IS NOW THOUGHT TO BE ANTI-ONCOGENIC. IT IS OF LITTLE INTEREST TO THE RAËLIANS, I SUPPOSE, THAT P53 ITSELF MUTATES. AND IT IS PURE SPECULATION ON THEIR PART THAT THE ENTIRE GENETIC CODE OF ALL SPECIES ALWAYS CONSISTS OF GENES WHICH PREVENT MUTATION FROM OCCURRING. EVEN IF THEY'RE RIGHT, HOWEVER, IT WOULDN'T FOLLOW THAT VORILHON'S PREPOSTEROUS UFO TALE IS TRUE. JUST ASK THE SO-CALLED CREATION SCIENTISTS, THE SCIENTOLOGISTS, THE URANTIANS, THE FOLLOWERS OF BARBARA MARCINIAK OR UFO BILLY, THE REMAINING MEMBERS OF HEAVEN'S GATE, OR THE SURVIVING MEMBERS OF OTHER UFO RELIGIONS.

ANYWAY, IF THE RAËLIANS ARE RIGHT, I AM LOOKING FORWARD TO ASKING THE ELOHIM WHY THEY CREATED THE MOSQUITO. IN THE MEANTIME, I MAY TAKE UP RAËL'S OFFER OF $2,000 TO ANYONE WHO STARTS A NEW RELIGION.

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THE SCIENCE SEGMENT

HUGE GAMMA-RAY BLAST SPOTTED IN SPACE

2/20/09

THE US SPACE AGENCY'S FERMI TELESCOPE HAS DETECTED A MASSIVE EXPLOSION IN SPACE WHICH SCIENTISTS SAY IS THE BIGGEST-EVER GAMMA-RAY BURST, A REPORT IN SCIENCE EXPRESS SAID.

THE SPECTACULAR BLAST, WHICH OCCURRED IN SEPTEMBER IN THE CARINA CONSTELLATION, PRODUCED ENERGIES RANGING FROM 3,000 TO MORE THAN FIVE BILLION TIMES THAT OF VISIBLE LIGHT, ASTROPHYSICISTS SAID.

"VISIBLE LIGHT HAS AN ENERGY RANGE OF BETWEEN TWO AND THREE ELECTRON VOLTS AND THESE WERE IN THE MILLIONS TO BILLIONS OF ELECTRON VOLTS," ASTROPHYSICIST FRANK REDDY OF US SPACE AGENCY NASA TOLD AFP.

"IF YOU THINK ABOUT IT IN TERMS OF ENERGY, X-RAYS ARE MORE ENERGETIC BECAUSE THEY PENETRATE MATTER. THESE THINGS DON'T STOP FOR ANYTHING -- THEY JUST BORE THROUGH AND THAT'S WHY WE CAN SEE THEM FROM ENORMOUS DISTANCES," REDDY SAID.

A TEAM LED BY JOCHEN GREINER OF GERMANY'S MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE FOR EXTRATERRESTRIAL PHYSICS DETERMINED THAT THE HUGE GAMMA-RAY BURST OCCURRED 12.2 BILLION LIGHT YEARS AWAY.

THE SUN IS EIGHT LIGHT MINUTES FROM EARTH, AND PLUTO IS 12 LIGHT HOURS AWAY.

TAKING INTO ACCOUNT THE HUGE DISTANCE FROM EARTH OF THE BURST, SCIENTISTS WORKED OUT THAT THE BLAST WAS STRONGER THAN 9,000 SUPERNOVAE -- POWERFUL EXPLOSIONS THAT OCCUR AT THE END OF A STAR'S LIFETIME -- AND THAT THE GAS JETS EMITTING THE INITIAL GAMMA RAYS MOVED AT NEARLY THE SPEED OF LIGHT.

"GAMMA-RAY BURSTS AS A CLASS QUALIFY AS THE BIGGEST EXPLOSIONS SINCE THE BIG BANG AND IN THE MEASUREMENTS WE REPORTED, THIS IS THE MOST INTENSE AND THE MOST EXTREME," REDDY SAID.

ASTRONOMERS BELIEVE GAMMA-RAY BURSTS OCCUR WHEN STARS RUN OUT OF NUCLEAR FUEL AND COLLAPSE.

THEY SHINE HUNDREDS OF TIMES BRIGHTER THAN A TYPICAL SUPERNOVA AND ABOUT A MILLION-TRILLION TIMES AS BRIGHT AS EARTH'S SUN, NASA SAYS ON ITS WEBSITE.

LONG GAMMA-RAY BURSTS, WHICH LAST MORE THAN TWO SECONDS, OCCUR IN MASSIVE STARS THAT ARE UNDERGOING COLLAPSE, WHILE SHORT BURSTS LASTING LESS THAN TWO SECONDS OCCUR IN SMALLER STARS.

IN SHORT GAMMA-RAY BURSTS, STARS SIMPLY EXPLODE AND FORM SUPERNOVAE, BUT IN LONG BURSTS, THE ENORMOUS BULK OF THE STAR LEADS ITS CORE TO COLLAPSE AND FORM A BLACKHOLE, INTO WHICH THE REST OF THE STAR FALLS.

AS THE STAR'S CORE COLLAPSES INTO THE BLACK HOLE, JETS OF MATERIAL BLAST OUTWARD, BORING THROUGH THE COLLAPSING STAR AND CONTINUING INTO SPACE WHERE THEY INTERACT WITH GAS PREVIOUSLY SHED BY THE STAR, GENERATING BRIGHT AFTERGLOWS THAT FADE WITH TIME.

BY STUDYING GAMMA-RAY BURSTS -- CALLED GRBS -- SCIENTISTS ARE TRYING TO GAIN A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE ORIGINS OF THE EARLY UNIVERSE, "THE PARTS WE CAN'T FULLY SEE YET," REDDY TOLD AFP.

"REMEMBER: THESE ARE SINGLE STARS THAT WE'RE ABLE TO SEE AT DISTANCES WHERE WE CAN'T EVEN RELIABLY SEE GALAXIES. THIS IS OUR ONLY SIGNAL FROM THAT FAR AWAY," HE SAID.

LAST MONTH, NASA ANNOUNCED THAT IT HAD DETECTED MOLECULAR LINES IN A GRB SPECTRUM.

"THAT'S THE CHEMICAL SIGNATURE OF A GALAXY THAT'S EXTREMELY FAR AWAY," SAID REDDY.

"THAT'S THE PROMISE THAT THE STUDY OF GRBS HAS HELD OUT FOR A LONG TIME AND ONLY NOW IS BEARING FRUIT: THAT YOU WILL BE ABLE TO GET THESE SAMPLES OF EXTREMELY FAR COSMOS. ONE DAY, WE WILL SEE GRBS FROM SOME OF THE EARLIEST STARS," HE SAID.

THE FERMI TELESCOPE AND NASA'S SWIFT SATELLITE DETECT "IN THE ORDER OF 1,000 GAMMA-RAY BURSTS A YEAR, OR A BURST EVERY 100,000 YEARS IN A GIVEN GALAXY," SAID REDDY.

ASTROPHYSICISTS ESTIMATE THERE ARE HUNDREDS OF BILLIONS OF GALAXIES.

THE FERMI GAMMA-RAY SPACE TELESCOPE WAS DEVELOPED BY NASA IN COLLABORATION WITH THE US DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY AND PARTNERS INCLUDING ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS IN FRANCE, GERMANY, ITALY, JAPAN, SWEDEN AND THE UNITED STATES.

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THE ARENA GOES ABROAD

RARE MAYA PANELS FOUND IN GUATEMALA

3/12/09

GUATEMALA CITY - ARCHEOLOGISTS HAVE UNCOVERED CARVED STUCCO PANELS DEPICTING COSMIC MONSTERS, GODS AND SERPENTS IN GUATEMALA'S NORTHERN JUNGLE THAT ARE THE OLDEST KNOWN DEPICTIONS OF A FAMOUS MAYAN CREATION MYTH.

THE NEWLY DISCOVERED PANELS, BOTH 26 FEET LONG AND STACKED ON TOP OF EACH OTHER, WERE CREATED AROUND 300 BC AND SHOW SCENES FROM THE CORE MAYAN MYTHOLOGY, THE POPOL VUH.

IT TOOK INVESTIGATORS THREE MONTHS TO UNCOVER THE CARVINGS WHILE EXCAVATING EL MIRADOR, THE BIGGEST ANCIENT MAYAN CITY IN THE WORLD, THE SITE'S HEAD RESEARCHER, RICHARD HANSEN, SAID ON WEDNESDAY.

THE MAYA BUILT SOARING TEMPLES AND ELABORATE PALACES IN CENTRAL AMERICA AND SOUTHERN MEXICO, DOMINATING THE REGION FOR SOME 2,000 YEARS, BEFORE MYSTERIOUSLY ABANDONING THEIR CITIES AROUND 900 AD.

THE EL MIRADOR BASIN WAS DESERTED MUCH EARLIER WITH THE LARGE URBAN POPULATION LEAVING A COMPLEX NETWORK OF ROADS AND WATERWAYS AND A MASSIVE PYRAMID NOW COVERED UNDER THICK VEGETATION.

THE EARLIEST WRITTEN VERSION OF THE POPOL VUH WAS DISCOVERED IN THE EARLY 1700S BY A SPANISH COLONIAL PRIEST AND THE PANELS ARE THE FIRST KNOWN SCULPTURAL DEPICTIONS OF THE MAIN CHARACTERS IN THE MYTH -- TWO HERO TWINS, HANSEN SAID.

"THIS IS PRE-CHRISTIAN, IT HAS TREMENDOUS ANTIQUITY AND SHOWS AGAIN THE REMARKABLE RESILIENCE OF AN IDEOLOGY THAT'S EXISTED FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS," HANSEN, AN IDAHO STATE UNIVERSITY ARCHEOLOGIST WHO HAS WORKED AT EL MIRADOR FOR OVER A DECADE, SAID.

ON ONE PANEL, THE TWINS ARE DEPICTED SURROUNDED BY COSMIC MONSTERS AND ABOVE THEM IS A BIRD DEITY WITH OUTSTRETCHED WINGS. ON THE OTHER, THERE IS A MAYAN CORN GOD FRAMED BY AN UNDULATING SERPENT, SAID HANSEN WHO WORKED AS A CONSULTANT FOR MEL GIBSON'S 2006 MOVIE ABOUT THE MAYA, "APOCALYPTO."

TOURIST TRAIN

SPREAD OVER MORE THAN 500,000 ACRES (2,000 SQUARE KM), EL MIRADOR IS THREE TIMES THE SIZE OF GUATEMALA'S FAMOUS TIKAL RUINS, A POPULAR TOURIST DESTINATION.

BUT EL MIRADOR'S CONSERVATION IS THREATENED BY DRUG TRAFFICKERS WHO USE THE AREA TO SHIP COCAINE AND HEROIN ACROSS THE POROUS BORDER WITH MEXICO, DEFORESTATION BY LOCALS, LOOTERS WHO STEAL ANCIENT ARTIFACTS TO SELL ON THE BLACK MARKET AND WILD ANIMAL POACHERS.

LAST YEAR, PRESIDENT ALVARO COLOM ANNOUNCED THE CREATION OF A MASSIVE PARK IN THE DENSE JUNGLE OF NORTHERN GUATEMALA'S PETEN REGION, WHICH WOULD ENCOMPASS BOTH EL MIRADOR AND THE ALREADY EXCAVATED TIKAL.

THE PLAN INCLUDES THE CONSTRUCTION BY 2020 OF A SILENT, PROPANE POWERED TRAIN TO CARRY THOUSANDS OF TOURISTS TO THE RUINS, CURRENTLY ONLY ACCESSIBLE BY HELICOPTER OR A TWO-DAY HIKE THROUGH THE JUNGLE.

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FAMOUS QUOTES

SIR ISAAC NEWTON (1643–1727) 84 YEARS.

HE WAS AN ENGLISH PHYSICIST, MATHEMATICIAN, ASTRONOMER, NATURAL PHILOSOPHER, ALCHEMIST, AND THEOLOGIAN AND ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL MEN IN HUMAN HISTORY. HIS PHILOSOPHIÆ NATURALIS PRINCIPIA MATHEMATICA, PUBLISHED IN 1687, IS CONSIDERED TO BE THE MOST INFLUENTIAL BOOK IN THE HISTORY OF SCIENCE, LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR MOST OF CLASSICAL MECHANICS. IN THIS WORK, NEWTON DESCRIBED UNIVERSAL GRAVITATION AND THE THREE LAWS OF MOTION WHICH DOMINATED THE SCIENTIFIC VIEW OF THE PHYSICAL UNIVERSE FOR THE NEXT THREE CENTURIES. NEWTON SHOWED THAT THE MOTIONS OF OBJECTS ON EARTH AND OF CELESTIAL BODIES ARE GOVERNED BY THE SAME SET OF NATURAL LAWS BY DEMONSTRATING THE CONSISTENCY BETWEEN KEPLER'S LAWS OF PLANETARY MOTION AND HIS THEORY OF GRAVITATION, THUS REMOVING THE LAST DOUBTS ABOUT HELIOCENTRISM AND ADVANCING THE SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION.

IN MECHANICS, NEWTON ENUNCIATED THE PRINCIPLES OF CONSERVATION OF BOTH MOMENTUM AND ANGULAR MOMENTUM. IN OPTICS, HE BUILT THE FIRST PRACTICAL REFLECTING TELESCOPE AND DEVELOPED A THEORY OF COLOUR BASED ON THE OBSERVATION THAT A PRISM DECOMPOSES WHITE LIGHT INTO THE MANY COLOURS WHICH FORM THE VISIBLE SPECTRUM. HE ALSO FORMULATED AN EMPIRICAL LAW OF COOLING AND STUDIED THE SPEED OF SOUND.

IN MATHEMATICS, NEWTON SHARES THE CREDIT WITH GOTTFRIED LEIBNIZ FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DIFFERENTIAL AND INTEGRAL CALCULUS. HE ALSO DEMONSTRATED THE GENERALISED BINOMIAL THEOREM, DEVELOPED THE SO-CALLED "NEWTON'S METHOD" FOR APPROXIMATING THE ZEROES OF A FUNCTION, AND CONTRIBUTED TO THE STUDY OF POWER SERIES.

NEWTON'S STATURE AMONG SCIENTISTS REMAINS AT THE VERY TOP RANK, AS DEMONSTRATED BY A 2005 SURVEY OF SCIENTISTS IN BRITAIN'S ROYAL SOCIETY ASKING WHO HAD THE GREATER EFFECT ON THE HISTORY OF SCIENCE, NEWTON OR ALBERT EINSTEIN. NEWTON WAS DEEMED THE MORE INFLUENTIAL.

NEWTON WAS ALSO HIGHLY RELIGIOUS (THOUGH UNORTHODOX), PRODUCING MORE WORK ON BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS THAN THE NATURAL SCIENCE HE IS REMEMBERED FOR TODAY.

“I DO NOT KNOW WHAT I MAY APPEAR TO THE WORLD,

BUT TO MYSELF I SEEM TO HAVE BEEN ONLY A BOY PLAYING ON THE SEA-SHORE,

AND DIVERTING MYSELF IN NOW AND THEN FINDING A SMOOTHER PEBBLE OR A PRETTIER SHELL

THAN ORDINARY, WHILST THE GREAT OCEAN OF TRUTH LAY ALL UNDISCOVERED BEFORE ME.”