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## USING THE NOTION OF TRAUMA TO ENHANCE RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND DOMINATION. THE EXAMPLE OF THE RAËLIAN MOVEMENT AND THE HAPPINESS ACADEMY<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract:* Founded in 1974 by Claude Vorilhon alias Raël, the Raëlian Movement is by far being the world's most important flying saucer community, which plays on subversive themes to spread its message all over the world. This article will show how Raël instrumentalizes the notion of trauma to reinforce his charisma and to cultivate the sense of community among his followers from the physical world to the Internet.

*Keywords:* trauma, charisma, Raëlian Movement, Happiness Academy, Raël.

### 1. Introduction

In 1974, Claude Vorilhon alias Raël founded the Raëlian movement, following what he called a trip on a planet populated by aliens that had created all human beings in a laboratory: the Elohim. Realizing that he was the new Prophet, Raël received the mission to spread the Elohim's message and to build an embassy for their coming to Earth.

The Raëlian Movement places personal development at the center of its message. It encourages, for instance, the development of an uninhibited sexuality, recommends frugal diet and the practice of relaxation techniques such as the "sensual meditation."<sup>3</sup>

In 2003, the movement made big headlines worldwide when they announced the birth of Eve, the first cloned human baby. In a word, the Raëlian Movement plays on subversive themes and regularly makes statements: it was recently the case of the support shown for the actor Dieudonné, well-known for his anti-Semitic attitudes, in the context of the bomb attacks against Charlie Hebdo in January 2015 (Bauduin 2015). In France and in several European countries, the Raëlians are regarded as members of a dangerous "sectarian movement," and in 2001 the National Assembly passed a law condemning the

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<sup>3</sup> The « Sensual Meditation » is a kind of Raëlian massage.

“defense of human cloning” which, de facto, implies only Claude Vorilhon and some of his closest disciples (Benkimoun 2003).

However, according to Susan Palmer, the real turning point which engaged this provocative communication strategy happened in 1992 during the “Dechavanne affair,” in a French TV show where Raël was a victim of a real “ambush journalism perpetrated by a television host, Christophe Dechavanne.” (Palmer 2004:71)

As Alexander (2004) puts it, this event can be regarded as a traumatic one since a “trauma occurs when members of a collectivity have been subjected to an event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memory forever and changing their future identity in a fundamental and irrevocable way.”

Although it concerned only Claude Vorilhon, this event led to a reaction of indignation among all the Raélians, which claimed their solidarity to their leader. At the same time, all the French media began to investigate the movement and, most of the time, to stigmatize it. Thus, a collective trauma has been added to the individual one through what continues to be regarded as persecution against the Raëlian community.

Based on two years of interviews and inquiries among the followers of the movement and an in-depth study of the Raëlian websites, this analysis attempts to answer two main questions. How does Raël exploit the notion of trauma for religious purposes? How could the researcher assess real trauma as opposed to imposture?

After showing the ambiguous relationship between the Raëlian Movement and the Media (I), we will focus on the methodological and ethical issues of this study conducted during the European Raëlian seminar (II). Third, we analyze the way Raël uses the notion of trauma in order to enhance his charisma and the belief in his ideas in the physical world, during the seminar (III) as well as on the Internet (IV).

## **2. The Raëlian movement and the media: a traumatic and ambiguous relationship**

According to Susan Palmer, the traumatic event in the history of the Raëlian Movement can be easily identified. It happened in 1992, during the French TV show called “Ciel, mon Mardi!” hosted by Christophe Dechavanne. On this occasion, Raël was branded “in the eyes of French viewers as a depraved cult leader who breaks up families, encourages single mothers to become nymphomaniacs and endorses pedophilia.” (Palmer 2004:71)

Thus, the “Dechavanne Affair” shares a few characteristics categorized by Jeffrey Alexander in his definition of trauma. For Jeffrey Alexander, “experiencing trauma” can be understood as a “sociological process that defines

a painful injury to the collectivity (...) thus imagined and represented, the collective identity will become significantly revised.”

For the Raélians, no doubt that there is a “before” and an “after” the “Dechavanne Affair,” in a sense that this event has led to what the Movement considers a media persecution which has not only struck Raël, but the whole Raëlian community. Indeed, “as a result of this defamatory broadcast, several Raëlians lost their jobs or their children in custody battles (...) The Dechavanne show precipitated a series of articles in the French media alleging that Raël preached pedophilia.” (Palmer 2004: 73) Immediately after this event, Raël took the decision to leave France for Canada in order to escape the media pressure and to build the new bases of the Raëlian Movement’s international growth. For the Raëlians, the “Dechavanne Affair” ended a period of a relative quietness, especially in France, and led the leaders of the Movement to create a Message which pointed out a plot (organized by media and politicians) against the community.

Moreover, to take Piotr Sztompka’s expression, this event “represents a threat to the group’s shared collective identity,” (2000) which has changed the Raëlian message and still continues to influence it. To conclude, regarding the Raëlian Movement, after this traumatic event, the identity of the community was “continuously constructed (...) not only by facing the present and future but also by reconstructing the collectivity’s earlier life.” (Alexander 2004: 22)

From an individual trauma experienced by the Raëlian movement leader, “generally understood as a physical or emotional shock” (Ostertag, Ortiiz 2013: 188), the “Dechavanne Affair” leads to a collective trauma which questions and reinforces “the prevailing sense of the community.” (Erikson 1976: 153) Indeed, all the Raëlians know exactly what happened during the “Dechavanne Affair” and seem to feel the need to evocate it when they speak about their relationship with the journalists and the feeling that they have been stigmatized. However, at the same time, they know that this event has given the Movement the possibility to benefit from the extraordinary media coverage.

For Carly Machado, the Raëlian Movement’s relationship with the mass media is very ambiguous. On one hand, Claude Vorilhon built the bases of his message in opposition to the mass media, but on the other hand, he has developed a polemic message largely influenced by the media’s main values. In 1974, during the French TV show called “Samedi Soir,” Raël came up with the “inaugural pact” (Machado 2008: 210) of the Raëlian Movement with the mass media. In a word, Raël often tries to cultivate the media’s attention to spread his message to the largest possible audience all over the world, and in order to do this, he advocates polemical subjects. Meanwhile, in order to increase his authority and his legitimacy within the movement, he gives to the idea of celebrity a real “religious value.” (Machado 2008: 212) This ambiguity also characterized my relationship with the Raëlians during my survey.

### 3. Clarity of my approach, ambiguity of the relationship

The first part of this study relates to our field of research and to the methodological and ethical issues concerning this one. Our field of investigation covers two areas. Firstly, before getting to know Raël's followers, it seemed appropriate to begin by studying the Raëlian presence on the "network of networks," the Internet. If for Celine Couchouron Gourung this approach may encounter some pitfalls (concerning the reliability and the ephemeral nature of information retained), it also presents two points of interest. First, it is important to establish a dialogue prior to the investigation of the physical field in order to understand it better. Thus, from the followers' perspective, the Internet is a means of becoming familiar with the values and interests deployed. Next, the presence of religious communities on the Internet can produce "significant social changes" (Barker 2004) by creating a new challenge and by feeding some potential doctrinal schisms.

Thus, thanks to several months of observation, between March and May 2010, it was possible to infer the general configuration of the Raëlian presence on the Internet and to understand the way it works in a network around its main website ([www.Rael.org](http://www.Rael.org)). Meanwhile, the study focused on a more informal presence of the movement: the followers' blogs, forums and Facebook. This allowed us to get familiar with the aesthetics, the universe and the values promoted by the Raëlian movement, but also to directly interact with some followers. Thus, it was possible to understand the logic of the passage between the unofficial and the official presence of the Raëlian Movement on the Internet, but also between the physical world and the Internet.

After conducting interviews with several followers, including the person in charge of the Internet coverage for the movement in France, we participated at several meetings held monthly by the movement ("contacts") and to a "weekend of awakening" that took place in April 2011, in the house of one of the most famous members of the organization, "Princess Loona." However, the peak moment of the presented study, by its duration and by the number of people involved, starting with Claude Vorilhon and the leaders of the movement, occurred during the "Happiness Academy," a seminar organized in Slovenia, for a period of one week at the end of July 2010 and again in 2011.

All in all, this research was not done without a certain feeling of ambiguity. This is the result of the contrast between what I had imagined and what I discovered there. Before coming I had made some contacts among the followers. I spoke of my approach and had been very well received by nice people. However, I had a real feeling of apprehension once in the seminar. Despite all my scientific distance, I was influenced by the "bad" reputation of the group, particularly as a French citizen (I expected to find unbridled sexual practices or individuals – victims of "brainwashing"). However, the atmosphere was warm and tinged with respect. People were open, intelligent, willing to discuss.

The ethics I adopted contrasted with the trauma and the resentment present for a large number of followers as a result of the negative media coverage. Indeed, many felt betrayed by the media, which also seems to have played the card of sincerity but treats the subject in a very partial manner. From the point of view of the approach adopted, I have opted for transparency. Such was not the case of the sociologist Cathelin, who tried to act as a follower or that of two journalists of the program “Infiltrators” on France 2 who had been unmasked (2004). So, the security people were present at the seminar and I had to explain clearly the reasons for my investigation and to give proof of my identity (which was duly controlled by the staff of the movement). However, my frankness was appreciated, and I had the opportunity to visit almost everything I desired and to conduct interviews without any true restriction.

As Susan Palmer, the great specialist of the Raëlian Movement, author of a field survey ten years before mine, noted, the Raëlians usually respond to questions in a detailed manner. They were all sensitive to the scientific nature of my investigation, which seems to coincide with the fact that, according to what they say, they practice a “scientific religion” themselves. Despite the sincerity of my approach, nothing was as easy as it seemed at first sight. One must first take some distance from all the situations and the convivial time spent with the Raëlians. Many of them were open, showed me confidence, but without betraying them, the scientific discourse and criticism must take their course. It is therefore possible to find myself in the position of Susan Palmer, who became specialist of the Raëlian movement at the climax of the scandal on the human cloning and who was, at the same time, temporarily excluded from the field by the Raëlians themselves as they did not appreciate the fact that she did not adhere to their ideas or that she evoked the charismatic relationship characterizing Raël and his movement. However, the leaders of the movement do not hesitate to use her work. Finally, it is certain that the staff will use some of my analyses, although the followers will once again have the feeling of having been duped. As for me, I will have finished my study with the feeling that I had somehow betrayed them even if I know that this is not true from a scientific point of view.

#### **4. The concept of trauma, a basis for Raël’s charisma**

The notion of trauma is one of the basic elements of Raël’s charisma. For Dominic Bartmanski and Ron Eyeran (2011), the discursive trauma construction involves an “on-going *process* of narrating and representing a collectivity through symbolic communication that is interpreted, formulated and made out to threaten cultural identities.” As many charismatic leaders, Raël has made his life a struggle against prejudice and violence in society.

Raël’s charisma is largely made by his followers. Surrounded by bodyguards, Raël does not only cultivate the image of a true prophet but also of a threatened man who doesn’t mix with his “fans” and does not participate in the afternoon activities. His advice is often debated by believers during daytime, his

style is copied. My interview with him was conducted in an impressive setting with a newsroom larger than a hundred square meters, two television cameras, a throne, a table and accessories prepared for the Prophet. Fifty Raëlian guides, all dressed in white, and three bodyguards were religiously waiting until we started the interview. However, Raël does not hesitate to voluntarily break codes and offered me a much more intimate space for the interview, on the restaurant terrace. This showed his will to build informal ties with me, which is typical for a charismatic leader. Indeed, as Dawson states in his theory of the charismatic leader facing the challenge of routinization:

“Charismatic authority hinges on knowing the leader (...) at least it hinges on the pretense of a personal relationship between the leader and his followers. To this end, the leader must be seen and heard from regularly. In fact, public and stage displays of the leader must be complemented by the continued exposure of some members, and new recruits in particular, to the personal presence of the leader. The charismatic aura must be continuously replenished with new, if highly programmatic, tales of electrifying effects of private interviews with the leader.” (Dawson, 2002: 86)

When I interviewed him, he placed the emphasis on the trauma he underwent in school and on the constant difficulty of meeting his prophetic mission (he even received death threats as he said, even if, as Palmer puts it, “there is no clue” about it (Palmer, 2004: 123)). This shows his willingness to play on emotion, to seduce his listener.

As a charismatic leader, he fits into the scheme established by Kaufmann, that of “seduction and break with society.” (Kaufmann 2004: 108) For him, the Catholic Church, the media and the politicians are at the head of a conspiracy, which exploit people and place them in a state of alienation. Compared to the hostility of the outside world, the Happiness Academy represents a special moment in the regeneration process of the “community,” such as described by Weber. In this sense, the seminar is an “axis mundi,” “a Centre (...) a place that is sacred above all” (...) These experiences are synonymous of “sacred time” – they have nothing to do with the temporal duration that precedes and follows them, they have a whole different structure and origin, as they belong to a primordial time, sanctified by gods and they are made present by the festival (Eliade 1969: 71).

However, despite the impression of general harmony, several types of tension can be observed among the followers. They are related to the sexual competition between males as well as to the will of Raël’s drawing attention. Meanwhile, there is a certain distancing from Raël’s message in the case of several followers who are inclined to doubt Raël’s status as a Prophet. Nevertheless, they do not dare to show their opinions as they are willing to preserve their friendship with the other members of the community, for fear of not being saved and because they refuse to question years of commitment.

The dynamics of commitment developed by the Raëlian Movement at the Happiness Academy is based on an approach that tries to save the followers from the outer world by several means:

1. The depreciation of a corrupt society: here is the condemnation and discredit launched by Raël to the whole society: “West makes people insipid. The meat is poisoned, the clergy corrupt, the media anti-cult, science and astrophysicists unable to understand the Elohim.”<sup>4</sup>
2. Being aware of being part of the elected and not being exposed to external influences: a form of moral blackmail is established as one should not betray the trust of the Elohim, not “pollute his/her genetic code”. In front of the superiority of the Elohim one must remain humble, trusting and imitating the creators – “letting go.” On one hand, Raëlism offers a philosophy which reconciles religion with science (Fox 2003) and fills the risk of the “disenchantment of the world” (Weber 1919). On the other hand, it is a source of ambiguity by requesting membership with the belief that the only guarantee of confidence is Claude Vorilhon. As a direct consequence, one must come to the training sessions because their attendance alone can make one happy.
3. This process requires a dimension of initiation. From the first day, new believers are invited to come on stage and to introduce themselves. There, in front of other profanes, but also of the whole assembly, they show their emotions, their joy and the sense of freedom they experience. This process will be completed, theoretically, by the ceremony of cellular transfer and the telepathic sending of their genetic code to the Elohim. This ceremony actually marks the first step on the path of the initiation. The follower accepts and starts spreading the “Messages,” and in exchange for this commitment, he/she is able to progress. A win-win exchange is initiated and the follower is unable to withdraw from it.

All in all, Raël’s discourse and representation are mainly based on a huge effort of imagination which leads to increase the media threat. As Piotr Sztompka points out “there may be traumas which are not rooted in any real traumatizing events or situations, but only in the widespread imaginations of such events.” (Sztompka 2000) Moreover, his message is based on the will to maximize the advantage of being Raëlian.

### **5. Raël on the Internet: maintaining the trauma and the sense of community**

As David G. Ortiz (2013) points out, “scholarship has rarely questioned how people use digital media in processes of constructing cultural trauma, or how they engage dominant narratives in processes of coping and cultural repair.” However, since 2000, a lot of the adepts are hugely active on the web as the

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<sup>4</sup> Rael, Happiness Academy, July 2011.

Raëlian structure has been completely restructuring communication around the Internet. The goal is to disseminate their ideas, but mostly to maintain the belief of the followers. There are what we could qualify as several on-line communication layers: the official sites cover six major themes (sexual freedom and openness to minorities, science, criticism of the Catholic Church, environment, defense of freedom of expression and response to the opponents of the movement).

Three of the most polemic Raëlian websites are called “Mediashit” (Mouvement de résistance sociale aux conditionnements psychologiques créés par les médias et par les pouvoirs publics<sup>5</sup>), Raelpress and raeliannews.org. Their goals are to spread Raël’s vision of the news on all topics and to denounce a plot against Raëlism.

In one article of Raelpress, according to Raël, “The Charlie Hebdo attack indicates current reality in France; the alleged feeling of national unity proclaimed by the French government doesn’t change the fact that France continues to wage wars that build hatred.”<sup>6</sup>

These official sites (almost twenty websites!) are relayed by blogs and followers on all these different topics, through social networks like Facebook.

A thorough study of these sites shows that the majority of the visitors are members of the Raëlian Movement. Moreover, the opinions expressed are monitored and censored, which leads to a consensual content. The aim of the Raëlian Movement would thus be less to proselytize and more to maintain the daily participation of the followers and to nourish their faith in the prophet.

Meanwhile, the Raëlian network gets involved in the organization and in the coordination of events conducted at the same time, all over the planet. This is, for example, the case of the site Gotopless.org, encouraging women to fight for gender equality through topless protests on all continents. These type of actions widely question the foundations of the society and fuel the rejection of the Raëlians, which stimulates their distrust in the outside world. The example of Facebook is also very relevant in showing how Raël feeds trauma, rejection of the outside world and promotes community involvement.

On his Facebook page and on the organization's sites, Raël denounces the media – this is a good example of how he uses the notion of injury for the purposes of belief. Even Charlie Hebdo’s case gave him a pretext. Certainly, Raël is Charlie, but at the same time, he uses the tragedy to denounce attacks against the freedom of expression. Raël multiplies his provocative actions (for example, he supports Dieudonné who had claimed to be in the shoes of Amedy Coulibaly, one of the attackers). He organizes provocative actions in the name of freedom of expression – they take place all over the world and are coordinated

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<sup>5</sup> <http://mediashit.org/news.php>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.raelpress.org/news.php?item.396.1>



from the Internet. All these actions enhance the feeling of trauma among the followers.

This could be considered as an echo to David Ortiz and Stephen's analysis of the reactions of bloggers facing Hurricane Katrina, "These included perceptions of what was 'true/accurate' versus what was a 'lie/misrepresentation (...)' In this sense, bloggers became carrier agents who vocalized their discontent with mass media accounts and in so doing turned individual anger into collective social realities of cultural trauma in need of coping and repair." (2013)

Following Claude Vorilhon's example, the believers develop a speech which bitterly criticizes the authorities and defends their prophet as they appreciate his courage, frankness and lucidity, facing lying media – subjective and unable to understand where the world goes. This kind of attitude goes along with the dynamics of the participation in social networks as Antonio Casilli defines it: participants cultivate their sense of community by practicing a form of "social toiletage," (2009) characterized by a range of small daily comments reinforcing the validity of their point of view.

This is coupled with some followers' desire to acquire a kind of celebrity status on the web among the community members, along with an approach that is much like a form of self-belief (i.e., by supporting the beliefs expressed by Raël, they cultivate their own faith and their sense of community). This way they become a sort of "carrier agents" who "narrate and construct [a story] over time so that it is experienced collectively." (Alexander 2004: 27)

## 6. Conclusion

All in all, even if the Raélians' trauma experienced in front of the ambivalent position of the media is real, it is also widely exploited by the movement in order to cultivate faith, community commitment and Raël's charisma. This instrumentalization process, initiated during the "Happiness Academy," continues on the Internet and goes even further as it places the followers in the role of actors, which enhances their own faith and that of their co-religionists.

The trauma born of the Dechavanne case and powered by the lack of ethics of the majority of the media places the researcher in an ambiguous relationship with his/her own subject. Despite the critical eye focused on the work of journalists, one cannot subscribe to the Raëlian message without being accused of subjectivity.

Like in Susan Palmer's case, being one of the specialists of the topic will not really help one to get closer to the movement as the followers will not subscribe to an approach that challenges their own commitment. Somehow, even if one cannot call it a traumatic experience, the fact of studying the Raëlian Movement will have had a deep impact on the researcher as well.

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## **УПОТРЕБАТА НА ПОИМОТ ТРАУМА ВО ЗАЦВРСТУВАЊЕТО НА РЕЛИГИСКИТЕ ВЕРУВАЊА И ДОМИНАЦИЈА. ПРИМЕРОТ НА РАЕЛИЈАНСКОТО ДВИЖЕЊЕ И АКАДЕМИЈАТА НА СРЕКАТА**

**Франсоа Ксавиер БОДУЕН**

*Апстракт:* Основано во 1974 од страна на Клод Воријон алијас Раел, Раелијанското движење е можеби најзначајната заедница на поклоници на летачки чинии која си поигрува со субверзивни теми во ширењето на своите пораки низ светот. Овој труд ќе покаже на кој начин Раел го инструментализира поимот траума за да ја зацврсти својата харизма и да го култивира чувството на заедништво помеѓу неговите следбеници од физичкиот свет до Интернетот.

*Клучни зборови:* траума, харизма, Раелијанско движење, Академија на среќата, Раел.