
CULT FOLLOWING
The Extreme Sects That Capture Our Imaginations—and Take Over Our Lives
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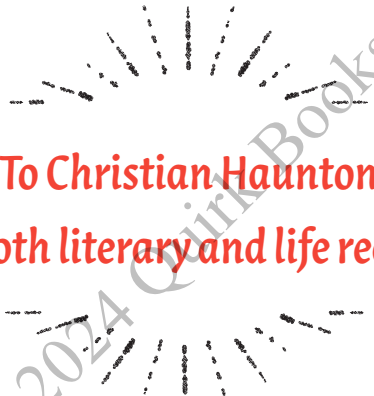

To Christian Haunton
For both literary and life reasons

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INTRODUCTION

We Are All Followers

Cult is a scary word. Like *terrorist*. Or *leprosy*. *Sharknado*. Even people in cults don't like the word *cult*. Dictionary definitions do little to encapsulate the fear and loathing the word inspires. Merriam-Webster simply describes a cult as "a religion regarded as unorthodox or spurious." The Oxford English Dictionary gets us a little closer to the creepy connotation with "a relatively small group of people having (esp. religious) beliefs or practices regarded by others as strange or sinister, or as exercising excessive control over members."

Noted psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton, in the 1991 paper "Cult Formation," goes deeper. To paraphrase, the three elements of his definition are:

1. A charismatic leader who often becomes an object of worship
2. A process of indoctrination
3. A mechanism of exploitation, whether that be financial, sexual, or otherwise

Now things are getting scary. But it gets even worse.

Cults often seem to end badly—whether in mass suicide, mass murder, or mere public embarrassment. Such as Heaven's

Gate members dead in their bunks, stomachs full of phenobarbital and applesauce. Or Chen Tao in their white clothes and cowboy hats despondently leaving their suburban Texas neighborhood when UFOs didn't arrive on the day their leader promised. Or *Game of Thrones* fans turning off their TVs, gobsmacked at how eight years of investment and dedication were rewarded with anticlimax. And there's always the good rule of thumb that if a group's leader wound up dead or in jail, the group was probably a cult.

Despite these multiple definitions, and despite the stranglehold cults have on the public imagination, it's surprisingly difficult to define a cult, or even to recognize one. For example, there's a thin, blurry line between a religion and a cult. Lifton's definition can easily apply to any religion—but the imperceptible delineation between a cult and a religion might just be its level of success. Religions are big. Mainstream. And as for ending badly, religions are large and influential enough to absorb or withstand crimes, scandals, and tragedies within their structures and continue on, ties straightened, collars starched, and halos burnished, in a way that smaller sects cannot.

To complicate the definition even further, cults can form around more than just religious ideas and goals—from the scientific to the political to the commercial. The Remnant Fellowship Church was based on dieting, for goodness' sake. And, of course, we've expanded the definition even further with the term *cult following*, which we use to describe obsession and fanaticism about pop culture.

But what if I were to tell you that, despite all the fear and strangeness and danger that cults can bring up, joining a cult is one of the most human things a person can do?

We all want to belong to something greater than ourselves. To be accepted by like-minded people. We all want to believe

that our ideas about the world are the ultimate truth of the universe. Cults are that straightforward: purpose, community, and understanding how the world works. Who doesn't want all those things?

And we are all followers. Even the most egotistical alpha out there follows something or someone. We follow parents and bosses, experts and mentors, cultural norms, laws of the land, and scientific consensus. We follow market trends and fashion trends and social media trends. We are programmed to follow.

Still, nobody actually joins a cult. At least not consciously. According to the cult expert Dr. Steven Hassan as quoted in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, "People join communities, not cults." And cults can offer a legitimate sense of community and all the benefits that come with it—friendship, dedication to a cause, stability, shelter. At least at first. The grisly end that many cult members meet with is often the final step in a years-long indoctrination process of members that begins with a lengthy honeymoon period, devolves into increased isolation and control, and culminates in tragedy only once every other escape route is blocked off. Some people never realize that they've joined a cult. Some realize it and defect from the group, while others realize it too late. Often, as in many relationships and commitments, followers put up with the bad because there is enough good present in the situation, or keep going because the sunk cost fallacy has convinced them they're in too deep and payoff is just around the corner.

Cult members are often unfairly derided as naïve, brainwashed followers when in fact, the research shows this couldn't be further from the truth. (And it's worth noting here that the concept of brainwashing is not supported by medical or psychological evidence—see page 236 for more.) Research from religious scholar Lorne L. Dawson's book *The Sociology of New*

Religious Movements shows that the average cult follower is middle to upper class, highly educated, intelligent, ambitious, curious, and idealistic. I'm willing to bet that description fits many of the readers of this book.

Anyone can be easily tricked by a person or group they've come to trust. Those same human longings and needs to connect with others and to belong to a group also make us extremely susceptible—especially during the most vulnerable times of our lives—to being taken advantage of by the unscrupulous and deluded. And here's where cults really get scary: cult leaders. Cults wouldn't be so bad if it weren't for the people who start them.

Joining a cult and starting a cult are two different impulses. One is an attempt to find acceptance and purpose, the other an attempt to control and exploit. But the most effective cult leaders are more than power hungry, egotistical, and charismatic (although they definitely need to be those things). They also need to have some new—or at least new-seeming—and often seriously strange ideas about life.

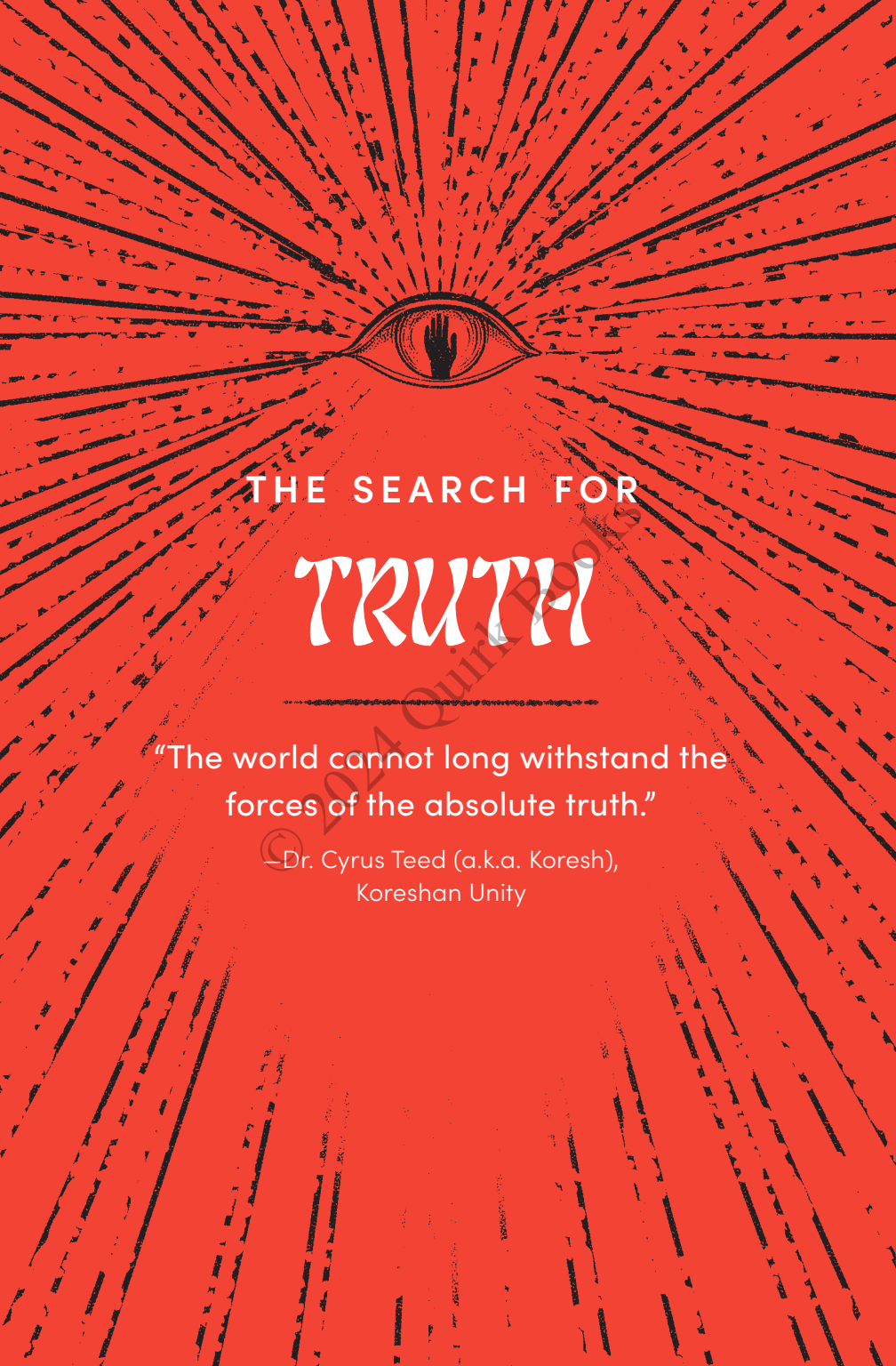
Within these pages, we will look at thirty of the most fascinating cults in history, from cults that believe extraterrestrials control our destiny, to cults that believe our feet hold the secrets of our future, to cults that believe eating is unnecessary.

And that's not just because the stranger the cult, the more interesting its story—although that's certainly part of it. More important, the stranger the cult, the more we learn about the elasticity of belief. About the desperateness of belonging. The tragedy of trust. And the vulnerability (and weirdness) of being human.

The cults in this book are organized not by what they believe in (e.g., UFO cults or doomsday cults), but by what their adherents sought by being part of the group: truth, protection, pur-

pose, salvation, betterment. The things we all seek. Because that's how you join a cult: by being human, and by searching for those things we all need and desire.

And that's probably the scariest thing about cults: not the damage they are capable of, but how relatable their members' search for meaning is, and how slippery the slope is to joining one.



THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH

"The world cannot long withstand the forces of the absolute truth."

—Dr. Cyrus Teed (a.k.a. Koresh),
Koreshan Unity

Who do we believe when they tell us about the nature of the world and the universe? About what our governments are doing? About history? About space? All the big, important truths that we don't have firsthand access to? Do we believe scientists, politicians, media, teachers, religious leaders? These cults say you shouldn't believe any of them, and offer opposing ideas derived from sources including the occult, extraterrestrials, modern messiahs, the spirits of the dead, and—in one case—the United States of America itself. And it's not always a choice between a red pill or a blue pill. Sometimes you need an aspirin to get through the headache of parsing these mind-bending ideas.

Raëlism

Extraterrestrial and Extra-sexual

The story of Raëlism involves a volcano, aliens, sex with said aliens, and claims of the first-ever human clone, and eventually goes on to ensnare Kanye West. And all because of the strange teachings of a French race car driver.

Claude Vorilhon started out as a busker and then had some minor success as a recording artist in Paris, but his passion was racing cars. He soon left the entertainment world and joined the famous Winfield Racing School, drove both as a test driver and competitively, and started a magazine dedicated to race cars called *AutoPop*. However, on December 13, 1973, when he was twenty-seven, his passion changed. He was about to start one of the most successful UFO cults this side of L. Ron Hubbard. Sometimes that's how life goes.

What makes a cult a UFO cult is the direct inclusion of extraterrestrials in its belief system. Sometimes aliens take the place of God as the creators of the human race. Other times they act in similar ways to angels, as messengers from a higher power. Some UFO cults even believe that *we* are latent extraterrestrials who have forgotten where we came from. Spaceships are usually involved, too, often to rescue the faithful from impending planetary apocalypse.

In Vorilhon's first close encounter with aliens on that December day, he followed an impulse to ascend Puy de

Lassolas, a dormant volcano in central France. When he arrived at the crater rim, he watched a silvery craft shaped like a flattened bell, about twenty-three feet in diameter, land in front of him—a spaceship. Turns out, he'd climbed that volcano under the telepathic influence of aliens. But not just any aliens: the aliens who created humanity some 25,000 years ago. It's all in the Bible, if you believe Vorilhon's teachings.

The being who walked out of that craft as casually as a man descending from a bus was four feet tall and male with green-tinged skin and green clothes, long black hair and a matching beard, and a force field around his head. His name was Yahweh, and he was from a race called the Elohim (a plural term used for God in the Old Testament). Over the course of six days at that volcano, this being reinterpreted the Bible for Vorilhon as a galaxy-spanning science fiction epic. The true story of Earth and its inhabitants went something like this:

Tens of millennia ago, the Elohim were experimenting with cloning and other genetic advances. However, in an effort to assuage political worries about the technology back home, a group of scientists went to a distant and lifeless planet—we know it these days as Earth—to test it, thereby kick-starting the book of Genesis and creating human life as we know it. But there was disagreement among the progressive and conservative factions of the Elohim, and those politics often caused trouble on Earth, precipitating the rest of the stories in the Bible. For instance, the worldwide flood was actually the Elohim nuking the planet because they found humans threatening. But lucky for us, they saved Noah in a spaceship in orbit, along with the cells of every creature on the planet for later cloning after the radioactivity died down. Yahweh also revealed that Satan was actually an anti-Earth bureaucrat of sorts, always trying to prove that the Earth experiment was going

badly. The end times are when the Elohim return to Earth to set up a paradise and resurrect the best and brightest from the dead via cloning. Oh, and apparently archangels wielded atomic disintegrators, the Ark of the Covenant was a transmitter and receiver, and Jonah was swallowed by an alien submarine.

While Vorilhon played Moses on that French Sinai, the alien being revealed that he was telling Vorilhon all this because humankind was now scientifically mature enough to handle the truth—and, since dropping nuclear bombs on Japan three decades earlier, technologically dangerous enough to be in need of it. The Elohim were ready to return to their creation, but they needed a prophet. They chose Vorilhon because he was open-minded, a scientific layman, from France (the birthplace of democracy!), and the son of a Jew and a Catholic. The Elohim wanted Vorilhon to spread their gospel and build an embassy for them, complete with a spaceship landing pad.

Per the instructions of Yahweh, Vorilhon was renamed Raël ("light of the Elohim") and established a group called MADECH, which, translated from the French, stood for "movement for welcoming the Elohim, creators of humanity" as well as "Moses preceded Elijah and the Christ." He gave lectures across France, preaching the new commandments of humanitarianism, world government, and geniocracy—an idealized system of government in which leaders are selected for their intelligence and compassion. He even got on TV a couple of times. In one appearance, one of the hosts dressed up in green and wore pink antennae to make fun of him.

MADECH grew marginally (or surprisingly well, depending on your view) to a couple hundred adherents. However, by 1975, Raël was done with it. In his book *Space Aliens Took Me to Their Planet*, he claims it was because the group was sufficient on its own and he had bigger plans, but others claim he was dissatis-

fied that the group was defaulting to the more generic UFOlogy that was in vogue at the time instead of treating it like the true religion it was. Either way, MADECH didn't last long. Fortunately, it didn't need to.

On October 7, 1975, Yahweh returned, this time taking Raël back to the unnamed home planet of the Elohim. That's when things got a little stranger—and a lot sexier.

While on the Elohim home world, Raël was further instructed on the precepts of the movement he was expected to lead. He witnessed his mother and himself reconstructed as "biological robots." He had sex with six female biological robots created specifically for him (apparently there were three Caucasians—a brunette, a blond, and a redhead—an African, and two Asians). He learned about sensual meditation, the Cosmic Orgasm, and telepathy. He watched enough nude green female dancing to make Captain James T. Kirk park his *Enterprise* and throw away the keys. Also, he met Jesus, Buddha, Elijah, Moses, and Mohammed. Possibly in the jacuzzi.

On his return, Raël got started in earnest on his new religion, Raëlism, which was symbolized by a swastika inside the star of David—a logo handed down to him from the Elohim. Raël's goal was still to welcome the Elohim back with an embassy and achieve the science-backed and sex-fueled paradise that they promised, but now he had the all-important rules for adherents. You gotta have rules in a cult. In this case, Raëlians are expected to keep their DNA clean by not smoking, doing drugs, or consuming caffeine; to tithe ten percent of their earnings; and to enjoy the hell out of their bodies with whoever is up for it ("Pleasure is the fertilizer that opens up the mind," Yahweh once told Raël)—the latter message much more powerful as a recruitment tool than forsaking coffee. They also partake in a baptismal rite four times a year called Transmission of

the Cellular Plan, wherein they wet their heads and commune telepathically with the Elohim, sending their genetic code to the Elohim for future cloning-facilitated immortality.

And that was—or, I should say, is—really the draw of Raëlism. Besides revealing the truth of the universe and our past and future, it promises freedom from sexual puritanism. Live forever, have plentiful sex, and explore the universe: you paint that promise on the side of a spaceship and tell me no one would at least be tempted to sign up and step in.

Raël traveled the world spreading his gospel of free love and sci-fi Christianity, while also promoting the three books he had written that detailed his experiences with the Elohim: *The Book Which Tells the Truth* (1974), *Extraterrestrials Took Me to Their Planet* (1975), and *Let's Welcome the Extraterrestrials* (1979). However, it was outside of Montreal where he finally found a permanent home for Raëlism. He set up a headquarters there called UFOland, complete with a life-sized replica of Yahweh's spaceship.

In the 1990s, the Raëlians continued to fundraise for the embassy and chose Jerusalem as the targeted location. As part of that fundraising and public relations push, Raël jumped back onto the racing circuit. The balding man with the short beard stood out among other racers, as he would wear white tunics and matching pants with a large metal symbol for Raëlism dangling from a chain around his neck. That symbol caused the group a bit of controversy at the time, due to the swastika. To adapt, they replaced the swastika in the Star of David with a galaxy swirl, although they later reverted to the original symbol, which they use and defend to this day.

The Raëlians also spent a lot of their time on sexually liberal causes. In 1992, they launched Operation Condom, in which they sent a pink van decorated with flying saucers and condoms

to the Catholic high schools of Quebec to hand out condoms to students (as a protest against the decision of the Quebec Catholic School Commission to veto condom machines in their schools). In 2006, they mobilized adherents to support strippers in Las Vegas. In 2007, they held a four-city event called Go Topless, encouraging women to bare their breasts in public. The event has since spread to scores of cities across the country.

It was also reported by Dr. Susan J. Palmer in the book *Sexuality and New Religious Movements* that Raël had created a secret all-female group within Raëlism called the Order of Raël's Angels. It was made up of women groomed on how best to sexually please the Elohim on their return (something the Elohim had apparently specifically requested).

In 2002, the Raëlians' scientific claims suddenly overshadowed their sexual exploits when a company called Clonaid announced that they had successfully birthed the first human clone. Her name was Eve. Clonaid, run by a chemist and Raëlian bishop named Dr. Brigitte Boisselier, was started by Raël himself five years earlier when Dolly the Sheep, the first animal cloned from a mature cell, made headlines. However, on this announcement by Dr. Boisselier, Raël distanced himself from the company, claiming he and the Raëlian movement had no connection to Clonaid anymore, and that the original company he had founded was just a website and a PO box in the Bahamas intended to test interest in human cloning in the wake of the Dolly breakthrough. Still, he defended the company. When Eve wasn't shown publicly, Raël claimed it was because she was taken away from her parents by a judge in Florida.

In recent years, the group has quieted down media-wise, although they still keep an active calendar on their website, celebrating Clitoris Awareness Month, Swastika Rehabilitation Day, and Femininity Day, among others. But in December 2022,

the group found themselves in the headlines again when rapper Kanye West, after sharing a series of antisemitic posts on Twitter (now "X"), posted an image of the swastika version of the Raëlian logo. The rapper was summarily booted from the site, and the media had fun explaining the origins of the symbol to an unsuspecting public that just wanted to know if Ye was a racist, and not that a French race car driver had been given the true answers to the origin of life from an ancient alien civilization.

Today, more than fifty years after that fateful meeting on a French volcano, Raëlism is still one of the more successful UFO cults. There have been no mass fatalities. Its leader is not in jail. And, according to the Religion and Media Centre, it has grown to more 65,000 members, with about 50,000 of those in Canada and the rest spread across more than eighty countries.

As for its appeal, that might best be summed up by Anthony Grey, an author, journalist, and BBC presenter. Also a Raëlian. In a 2005 foreword to a set of Raël's writings, Grey wrote that Raëlism is "the only truly persuasive explanation I have discovered to date of our physical origins, our planetary history, our place and present standing in our known universe, and last but not least, the reasons behind our chronically divisive and potentially self-destructive global religious beliefs." He goes on to say that the teachings of Raëlism "affirm that we are not alone in the universe . . . we are loved, observed, and guided . . . by a superior advanced human civilization."

As of the writing of this book, the Raëlians are still trying to build that embassy in Jerusalem, which, according to their five-phase plan, should be finished by 2030. At that time, according to their website, "Official contact with the extraterrestrials will be the biggest news ever, and the embassy will become the most important place on the planet!"