**Comparative Analysis of New Religious Movements:**

**The Raelian Church and**

**the Discordian Church**

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Introduction

Within the latter half of the 20th century, contemporary religious organizations called New Religious Movements (NRMs) have been emerging as alternatives to mainstream religious traditions such as Christianity and Judaism (Roberts and Yamane 2012:68). These religious groups have been continuously growing in numbers and are developing into well-established and well-respected institutions all across the globe. NRM’s differ from conventional religions because they strive to separate themselves from mainstream society by demanding high-levels of group conformity based on a well-defined set of ethical values and boundaries that members must abide by (Roberts and Yamane 2012:188). Two radical new religious movements that best exemplify the definitions of what an NRM is are the Raelian Church and the Discordian Church. Both are relatively newly-formed, unconventional religious cults that have distinctive behavior codes, value sets, and organizational structures that their members must accept as the truth and must live in accordance with such codes.

**The Raelian Church**

The Raelian Church was founded in 1974 by former French journalist, Claude Vorilhon. Vorilhon claimed to have had alien encounters with beings that gave him knowledge about the origins of religions such as Christianity, Judaism, and Buddhism (Palmer 2004:29). Claude claimed he was told by these beings to change his name to Rael and that he must sharing his newly-found information with the public. He did this by preaching publicly on street corners and handing out pamphlets and distributing his own magazines to passerby’s (Palmer 2004:35). He wrote numerous books about his teachings which enabled the “word” of the Raelian Church to spread rapidly. By late 1974, Rael had formed a group of 2,000 members in Paris, France as reported by (Gallagher 2012:19). By 1980, formal publications of Rael’s books were available in the Japanese language, where a large following soon developed (Palmer and Sentes 2000:91). The Raelian Church became increasing globally-recognized and steadily gained members in other countries.

The Raleian Church’s core beliefs about the origin of human life diverge from the conventional beliefs of mainstream religious traditions. The Raelian Church does not believe in an omnipotent “God.” Rather, they believe that life on Earth was scientifically created by a group of extraterrestrials called *Elohim* (Palmer and Sentes 2000:95). Members of Elohim are said to have appeared as human beings but were often mistaken to be gods and angels by humans. Raelians believe that the messengers of Elohim included prophets like Buddha and Jesus (Gallagher 2010:20). According to Raelism, the founder, Rael, is the only one who has received the final message of Elohim, and only until people become “pacified” by the Raelian Church, can they can welcome Elohim into their lives (Stebbins 2006:394).

In comparison to the conservative practices of religious movements, the Raelian Church is perceived as being a sexually-liberal cult because of their central practices center around bodily-functions and the physical interactions between human bodies. Some of the core beliefs of the Raelian Church include the support of the use of contraceptives and support the act of masturbation and promote sexual freedom among people (Palmer 2004:50). Raelians are also supporters of technological advancements. They believe science can create a “paradise” on earth free of violence, disease, and the need for work. Accordingly, Raelians support the use of genetically-modified food and nanotechnology (Palmer 2004:102).

There are many practices that members of the church must engage in to order to be fully-recognized as Raliens. The baptism initiation rite is perhaps the most important of these practices. During this ceremony, a formal *Guide* places water on the forehead of the member being baptized (Helland 2007:282). Baptisms can only be performed on four specific days of the year that are ordained by Rael, himself (Richardson 2007:378).

Another common Raelian practice is a set of exercises called *Sensual Meditation.* These exercises are composed of six activities all with the objective to appreciate and understand the organismic functions of the human body (Gallagher 2010:22). Raelians host group-seminars that lead organized exercises including these Sensual Meditations. Raelian seminars have become known for their sexual promiscuity among members which has created negative publicity for the Church (Gilbert 2008:264).

The Raelian Church uses symbols as identifying features to unite the group. The *Swastika* is used on the Raelian flag, which stands for peace (Palmer and Sentes 2000:101). Another symbol Raelians use are *colored bracelets* that members wear during seminars. Differently colored bracelets identify members’ different purposes for attending the seminar. It provides a way for members to connect with each other (Collins 2004:62).

The Raelian church has a clerical structure of 7 ascending levels from 0-6. The highest four levels include *Guides*, descending from the top level-6 *Guide of Guides* to the level-5 *Bishop of Guides* (Helland 2007:284). Each ranked person makes the decision about who becomes a *guide* in the level below them. When a member is accepted into the Raelian Church, they being as level-0 *Trainees*. As of 2007, the official number of Raelian members peaked at 70,000 people in over 104 countries with 170 Guides and 41 Bishops. Claude Vorilhon has held the highest position for 3 consecutive 7-year terms (Richardson 2007:377).

The Raelian Church uses new digital media such as the internet and online press releases to spread messages of the Raelian Church and to organize their communities across the globe. Since the Raelian Church has sects based all over the world, digital media is by far the most efficient way to keep the members of the Church updated with current events, teaching, seminars that the group organizes (Roberts and Yamane 2012:70). There is an official Raelian Press website as well as a radio-talk website where one can listen to sermons given by Rael about Raelian visions and messages (Palmer and Sentes 2000:90). Rael meets Karl Marx’s qualifications of an exemplary and ethical prophecy because while he was a persuasive public speaker and talented writer with a history in journalism who has the ability to appeal to the masses, he also implements strict ethical-behavior codes and has created rituals and traditions that that members of the church must abide by (Luchte 2009:419). His implementation of these codes has created a solid ethical foundation for the members of church to look to for guidance. These codes have also created a common ground for members to bond with each other (Roberts and Yamane 2012:56).

**The Discordian Church**

Another new religious movement that is not as distinguished as the Raelian Church, but none the less, has been growing in membership over the past few decades, is a NRM called the *Discordian Church*. This new religious movement was founded in the 1957 in a bowling alley in California by Kerry Thornley and Greg Hill when they say they experienced an epiphany of “almighty chaos” which took the form of a goddess named Eris (Childester 2005:17). There was a surge of NRMs in the 1950‘s-1960’s in America because of the social and political protests of the counterculture against the values of mainstream Western society (Levine 2008:186). As an alternative, people developed interests in Eastern religious beliefs such as guru worship and meditation and created spiritual movements that mimicked these Eastern practices (Levine 2008:188). The Discordian goddess, Eris, functions as an idol of love to the Discordian Church just as Hindu worship Krishna as the goddess of love (Levine 1998:182). Thornley and Hill wrote a book of teachings based on the worship of the goddess *Eris*, whom they called “*the infallible goddess of chaos”* (Younger 1994:16). This book was called *Principia Discordia*. The core belief of this religion is the idea that *order* and *disorder* are merely illusions created by the human nervous system (Gordon 1982:12). Thus, Discordians believe there is no objective sense of order and disorder. Members pride themselves in not being understood by anyone which creates a sense of exclusivity within the cult members (Gordon 1982:20).

The foundational document of Discordianism, *The Principia Discordia*, written by Kerry Wendell (a co-founder of the church and a friend of both Hill and Thornley,) and Malaclypse (the Younger, the name that Greg Hill Chose to call himself after heexperienced his epiphany at the bowling alley) (Childester 2005:36). *The* *Principia Discordia* is an unconventional “sacred text” composed of illustrations, low-brow-jokes, and poems that explains the beliefs and structures of the Discordian Church in convoluted and purposely confusing ways (Palmer 2005:29). The main premise of this document is that Discordianism is an *antithesis* to mainstream religions movements (Palmer 2005:30).

One of the tenets discussed in *The Principia Discordia* is the numerological thesis of *the Law of Fives.* This law states that everything that happens in the universe can be divisible by *fives*. This law is a demonstration of the Discordian theory of individual perception. They claim that if “you try hard enough,” once can apply the Law of Fives to just about anything (Younger 1994:27).

The Discordian Church has a few symbols that members use to identify with other members. Discordians issue *pope cards* to members that demonstrate “good behavior” which deem them “official and authorized popes of Discordia” (Palmer 2005: 56). These cards provide an incentive for people to abide by Discordian teachings. Another symbol used by the Discordians is a logo called the *sacred chao.* This symbol resembles the *Ying-Yang* symbol of Taoists and similarly illustrates the interaction of order and disorder within the universe (Collins 2004:105).

Discordian members say that idea of organizing their religion is a paradox because the main principle of this movement is *disorganization* and *chaos* (Collins 2004:84). However, in order for the group to function, there is a slight sense of hierarchical structure of organization among them. A group of people called *Episkopos* are the overseersof the activity of the Discordian sects (Davis 2011: 441). Aside from these overseers, there is not a clear exemplary of ethical prophecy within the Discordian Church. The stigmatization and hostility from outsiders forces members to draw more closely with one another and raise boundaries against outsiders (Roberts and Yamane 2012:192).

One of the church’s founders, Kerry Thornley, was a publisher of counterculture magazines in the 1960’s in America. He used this media to spread the teachings of the Discordian Church to the public (Davis 2011: 438). Currently, digital media such as websites and public forum sites maintained by members help spread the message of Discordianism. However, because *order* is contradictory to the beliefs of Discordianism, there is no hierarchical organizational system that focus on member outreach and communication, church meetings, or spreading Discordia propaganda. The members of the Church make little organized effort to preserve and develop the Discordian Church. Strangely enough though, the church is continually gaining followers (Palmer 2005:94).

**Comparison between the Raelian Church and the Discordian Church**

The Discordian Church and the Raelian Church share a few characteristics between each other. They are both organized New Religious Movements that were created in the last half of the 20th century in developed countries; the Discordian Church in America and the Raelian Church in France. They both require some level of moral commitment from its members, though the Raelian Church requires much more personal investment t of its members than the Discordian Church requires of its members (Gilbert 2008:264). One of the main similarities of these NRM’s is that they both have been accused by the public media of purposely creating controversies in order to gain publicity and membership. The Raelian Church, for one, created a human-cloning company called *Clonaid* where they claimed to have successfully cloned a human-baby, named Eve (Helland 2007:281). There was no definite proof that this ever happened, but in the process of investigation, the Raelian Church was listed on the headlines of newspapers and even made it onto a *60-Minutes* episode (Richardson 2007:398). Some said that the whole stunt was a ploy to gain as much publicity and garner as much attention as possible. The Discordian Church in itself, is a controversy because it while it has declared itself as a serious religion, it mocks the organization and structure of all religious groups (Davis 2011:451). Conventional religious groups shun Discordianism as merely a hoax and believe that hap-hazardness of the organization of the Discordian Church poses a threat to the legitimacy of new religious movements as while institutions (Richardson 2011:394). Discordianism is considered by some to be a *parody religion* because members try to maintain their religious identity by undermining it as much as possible with satirical humor and rebellious behavior (Childester 2005:203). Other similarities that these NRM’s share is that they have symbols that unite members and have sacred texts that explain the principles of each religion.

**Conclusion**

While the Raelian and Discordian Churches share the label of being NRM’s, they differ in more ways than they are alike. The Raelian Church has a much larger following with a stricter set of ethical codes than the Discordian Church, which has an unknown number of members with no real set of ethical codes. The Raelian religion also has organized gatherings for members to connect with each other and learn the teachings of Rael (Roberts and Yamane 2012:102). The Discordian Church has nothing of the sort. The Raelian Church requires its members to renounce their previous belief systems in favor of the Raelian’s teachings. The Discordian Church does not require such moral commitments of its members. Discordian members are allowed and expected to have a separate social life outside of the church where they do not abide by Discordian teachings. This is to maintain the lack of functionality and organization within the church (Roberts and Yamane 2012:77). Discordianism is primarily a loosely organized, individually-based life philosophy that allows the members to have creative agency in their practices whereas the Raelian religion is a highly organized, community-based life-philosophy that dictates many, if not all aspects of how the church members should live their lives.

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