

New Religious Movements, Knowledge, and Science: Towards an Interdisciplinary Discussion

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Over the past eighteen months the *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* has been hosting a lively discussion about the various ways in which Muslim scholars and authors argue for the compatibility of (their) religion and science.¹ Meanwhile, also inspired by the participation in a notable conference about new religions,² I grew convinced that at least some of the currents or tendencies within the contemporary debate over Islam and science can be best understood if we think of them in terms of new religious movements (NRMs). They namely acquire a degree of doctrinal autonomy perhaps even unsuspected by their own initiators since they possess their own exegetical methods, their “prophets” and “heroes,” and their main narratives. Such is the case for instance of the “scientific miracle of the Qur’an,”³ or of Islamic creationism *à la* Harun Yahya.⁴

On New Religious Movements

After this incursion into the study of NRMs I am very much inclined to think that it can profitably be hybridized with the study of religion and science. On the one hand, with the adoption of the models traditionally developed and employed by experts in religion and science⁵ NRMs scholars would acquire fresher and deeper insights into the theology of religious phenomena mainly studied in sociological terms. On the other hand, the scholars of religion and science that so far have principally specialized in the relationship between contemporary science and the main world religions, would find a subject whose relative delimitation in terms of time and adherents (if compared with that of major religious traditions) would allow an unprecedented sharpness of observation and results.

The debate over the compatibility with science has emerged, for religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as a necessity dictated by a historical encounter with modern science. Prophets or religious leaders who lived and communicated their messages not later than half a century or a century ago (or who are still alive and teaching) often make references to science or incorporated teachings related to it, explicitly and intentionally. Recentness might allow an accurate reconstruction of their influences and references, and the delimitation of their followers might allow for fieldwork and clear results regarding the impact of those religious doctrines on their attitude towards science, knowledge and education.

¹ The discussion starts with Edis 2014.

² The 2014 CESNUR Conference co-organized by the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), the International Society for the Study of New Religions (ISSNR), and the Institute for Studies of Religion, Baylor University; see <http://www.cesnur.org/2014/waco-programme.htm>

³ For a definition of it and a thorough discussion of its variants see Bigliardi 2014.

⁴ For a thorough discussion of Harun Yahya’s creationism see Ross Solberg 2013.

⁵ Such models are usually elaborated with reference to specific currents and debates within major religions (see for instance Barbour 2000 and Stenmark 2004) but not as the result of the analysis of a specific case-study, unlike Benjamin Zeller’s work (see below).

To my knowledge, at least two NRMs experts have recently tried to raise their colleagues' attention over the importance of such an approach. One of them is Benjamin E. Zeller who, in his pivotal monograph *Prophets and Protons* (Zeller 2010), points out that “the serious study of the intellectual positions of NRMs” is a rather neglected matter since “monographic studies of new religions tend not to focus on the content of the religious messages proffered by such groups, but instead consider sociological issues.” Zeller closes his monograph by stating: “I hope that other students of new religions similarly will look to their theologies as fertile ground for exploration” (Zeller 2010, 169).

Zeller's study culminates with the elaboration of a threefold typology for the interaction of religion and science, each of whose types is modelled on the relationship entertained with science by the movements that Zeller focuses upon: the Unification Church, the Hare Krishna Movement, and Heaven's Gate. The first one represents the attempt at guiding science towards religiously established goals; on the one hand science and religion are presented as separated spheres, on the other hand its “ethical boundaries, methods, and even research goals” are conceived as religion-guided. The second one distillates an approach aimed at replacing mainstream science with an alternative scientific system. The third one, finally, tries to absorb the methodology of science into the religious system itself (Zeller 2010, 165).

The second example is James R. Lewis who, in a pivotal paper (Lewis 2010) focusing upon new religious movements, singles out possible ways in which science is used by them as a source of legitimation (exploiting a prestige that, in its turn, partly but significantly depends on the perception of science itself as the most solid form of knowledge possible, and as a problem-solving activity). *In nuce*, the strategies identified by Lewis are:

- (i) Terminological/rhetorical, when traditional religion and practices are described as “scientific”;
- (ii) Methodological, when religion engages in a systematic research, for instance spiritual;
- (iii) Related to a worldview, when religion incorporates science;
- (iv) Related to empirical research on religious practices, when they are encouraged or emphasised so that the religion, being itself the object of a scientific investigation, seems to be scientific per se;
- (v) The development of (allegedly) alternative science;
- (vi) Usage of paratechnology;
- (vii) Academic, when emphasis is placed on those religious members who hold PhDs or in general can boast academic credentials.

This typology is presented by Lewis as provisional and the strategies are not mutually exclusive (Lewis 2010, 19-20).

Regarding Raelism

I can testify how the study of the science-religion relationship in an NRM can disclose unsuspected and surprising results. Let's consider Raelism, a NRM originating with the messages of a former race-car driver, singer, and journalist, Claude Vorilhon (b. 1946) who claimed to have been contacted by an alien race, the Elohim, in the 1970s. According to Vorilhon, who assumed the name of Rael, such aliens have created humanity in a remote past by using the Earth as a giant biological laboratory. Human beings are to develop similar skills not only to be able to create another race in their turn, but also to enhance their own life. This is accomplished mainly with the creation of clones through which their individual existences can be indefinitely prolonged while the earth is transformed into a hedonistic society with the help of science itself.⁶

Raelism has boasted up to 90,000 adherents. In the years 2000-2001 the movement managed to attract considerable attention worldwide while advertising collaboration with the company Clonaid that, under the direction of the French chemist and Raelian Dr Brigitte Boisselier (b. 1956), allegedly managed to give birth to a human clone (a claim that was never supported with any evidence). More recently, when the problem of the religious/traditional practice of female genital mutilation and criticism against it began acquiring global visibility, Rael, also drawing upon extant Raelian exaltation of sexual pleasure, started championing the anti-mutilation cause and boasted the building of a clitoral reconstruction hospital in Burkina Faso. Analogously to the cloning initiative and Clonaid, this was done through the Raelian-sponsored organization Clitoraid that likewise claimed to have some medical doctors on its side; this initiative was also controversial.

At first sight, even if one overcomes the strong temptation to dismiss Raelism as little more than postmodern folklore, the analysis of its relationship with science might seem relatively easy to describe: Rael was astute enough to pepper his earlier books with vague references to science and technology so that, duly re-interpreted, they retrospectively looked like prophecies; reference to "science" and "technology" was used by his movement as an ennobling canopy in order to contrast his religion with faith-based ones; and finally, with initiatives such as Clonaid and Clitoraid, he was able to piggyback visible debates related to scientific as well as ethical issues, gaining visibility in turn for his own movement. I have (somewhat ironically) called this approach *Progressive Patronizing Parasitism* (see Bigliardi 2015c).

But there is more to the story. First of all, a former Raelian and presently anti-Raelian activist, Jiro Kambe,⁷ upon reading the paper in which I explained the concept of *Progressive Patronizing Parasitism*, confirmed my analysis on the one hand, but on the other pointed out that some Raelians who joined the movement at a young age were

⁶ The canonic text on Raelism is Palmer 2004.

⁷ He currently manages the blog *Raelian "Truth"*: <http://raelian-truth.blogspot.mx/>

inspired by its doctrines to pursue high academic qualifications in scientific fields such as biology. However, Kambe also alluded to the fact that Rael, in his most recent communications to the movement, even invited affiliates to reject the pursuit of knowledge as just another form of useless “possession” (Bigliardi 2015a).

Even more surprisingly, a current member of the Raelian movement, a biologist named Damien Marsic, did not react negatively to my description of *Progressive Patronizing Parasitism* but stated:

Globally, I find your analysis of science in Raelianism well documented and quite accurate. It echoes my personal frustrations with what I often see as pseudoscience in the Raelian discourse that uses science as a marketing tool instead of an attitude or a method. But you should keep in mind that the Raelian Movement is still very young and is constantly evolving, with sometimes very strong internal debates. I have confidence it is learning from its mistakes and moving in the right direction, even if slowly.⁸

Regarding Clonaid and Clitoraid Marsic added:

Clonaid is only about unsubstantiated claims, it has always been extremely secretive, and it clearly lacks any credibility whatsoever. In contrast, Clitoraid is extremely open and everything can be verified easily. Clitoraid’s head surgeon, Dr. Marci Bowers, is not even a member of the Raelian Movement, she is a Buddhist and has no interest in the Raelian Message. She volunteers for Clitoraid strictly in order to help victims of genital mutilation. She is a renowned surgeon with an impeccable reputation and can easily show documentation on all the surgeries she performed for Clitoraid.⁹

If the statements by Kambe and Marsic will be confirmed, we must conclude that the picture we gain of Raelism while focusing on its relationship with science is far from allowing us an easy dismissal. In fact, it presents a wide spectrum of tensions, developments, and contradictions, each one corresponding to a general typology of interaction:

- (i) A rhetorical and rather uni-dimensional, optimistic, positivistic approach to science, often interspersed with pseudoscience (*Progressive Patronizing Parasitism*) that nevertheless;
- (ii) Might inspire adherents to pursue a career in science proper while;
- (iii) An internal attempt is being made to raise scientific literacy within the movement itself; later on the movement’s initiator develops his views into;

⁸ Personal communication via e-mail, February 21, 2015.

⁹ Personal communication via e-mail, June 14, 2015.

(iv) A *rejection* of knowledge including science while;

(v) Representatives of established scientific practices such as (supposedly) Dr Bowers are inspired to join the movement at least as far as its practical initiatives are concerned.

All this not only enhances our specific understating of Raelian dynamics, but also reshuffles one's convictions regarding the possible ways in which science and pseudoscience might interact, or what the differences can be between a traditional and a new (and hence supposedly "less serious") religious movement. In other words, such typologies enrich our theoretical equipment and might be detected in (or used to understand) other religious movements or tendencies within major religions. In particular, the *rejection* of a certain kind of education/knowledge/scientific theory seems to be an especially relevant topic (one can think for instance of communities such as the Amish who strive to live "outside modernity"). Central questions are:

How is such rejection argued?

How do adherents of a religious movement justify and negotiate the consumption of technological products or the application of techniques (for instance medical ones) that their doctrines forbid them to acquire?

It is my hope that more and more fellow scholars can join this discussion with new case studies, comparative analyses, and fresh theoretical models.

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