

## New Age, Paranormal Topics Influenced Alleged Domestic Pipe Bomb Terrorist Luke Helder

BENJAMIN RADFORD

At a time when international terrorism was on America's collective mind, it was an American terrorist who panicked many in the heartland in May of 2002. Six people were injured when pipe bombs left in their rural mailboxes exploded. Over the course of a week, eighteen pipe bombs were found in Iowa, Illinois, Nebraska, Colorado, and Texas.

Finally the bombs were traced to Luke J. Helder, a twenty-one-year-old college student from Pine Island, Minnesota. Following a high-speed car chase, he was armed with a shotgun when he was arrested in Reno, Nevada, on May 7. According to messages and material Helder left near the attacks, the bombs were "attention getters." Though many news reports characterized Helder's messages as anti-government, in fact many of them deal with his philosophical views and the paranormal.

In a six-page typed letter to *The Badger Herald*, a student newspaper at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Helder discussed his belief in various paranormal topics and that death is an illusion. A friend of his was quoted by ABC News as saying that Helder "seemed really obsessed about New Age religion and death and the fact that death really doesn't mean an end to existence."

His motivation to plant bombs to kill and injure people came from his desire to enlighten the world to his beliefs and revealed truths: "I'm doing this because I care. . . . In the end you will know I was telling you the truth anyway. . . . I'm taking very drastic measures in attempt to provide this information to you."

Helder writes that each person can create his or her own reality, and that "once you begin to realize the potential you have as a consciousness/soul/spirit,

you will begin to harness the abilities you have to produce realities. . . . Because you are producing the reality entirely, you are not confined to the laws



Luke Helder, a 21-year-old college student, is taken into the Washoe County Jail in Reno, Nevada.

of physics. . . ." Helder discusses the New Age idea of lucid dreaming, in which, he says, "you enter a reality within your body." Helder mentions astral projection as a path to knowledge, writing "Whether it's logic, meditation, channeling, astral projection, or ghosts, all are ways of knowing." An ex-girlfriend of Helder's said that he was fascinated with astral projection, or out-of-body experiences, and tried unsuccessfully to achieve one several times.

Helder also had a strong interest in ghosts: "Many consciousnesses linger around on earth, clutching to material things; this is what ghosts are. . . . You may hear ghost stories, but have you ever seen one? If you haven't, get out the camera and start seeing. . . . I was curious about the existence of ghosts, and my curiosity led me to further investigation, which in turn allowed me to know ghosts truly do exist. Needless to say, it was an exciting occasion to finally see one! When I got my film developed to find

orbs, the week was even more exciting!"

Here Helder is referring to the idea that ghosts can be photographed, and appear as small unexplained blurs, lights, or "orbs" in photographs that were unnoticed when the photo was taken. As CSICOP Senior Research Fellow Joe Nickell notes in this book *Camera Clues*, there are many perfectly ordinary, photographic explanations for such phenomena.

"Orbs" are often simply the result of a flash reflecting dust particles or moisture droplets near the lens, or an unnoticed shiny surface.

Nonetheless, many self-styled "ghost experts" write books and give seminars on such "orbs" as a way for people to confirm the existence of spirits. Had Helder looked for science-based, skeptical information on ghosts instead of to the rafters of uncritical, pro-paranormal books, he might have come to different conclusions.

The paranormal cannot be said to have caused Helder's bombing attacks, just as belief in UFOs did not directly cause the mass suicide of the Heaven's Gate cult in March of 1997. But clearly belief in and fascination with the paranormal played a large role in these crimes and tragedies. Magical thinking in one part of a person's life can easily lead to a lack of critical thinking in others as well.

As usual, those who knew Helder appeared in the media to express shock and puzzlement over his actions. Helder's parents said that the only odd thing they'd seen him do recently was ask for his mother's Bible, then sit and read it for an hour, something they had never seen him do before. Within a week he was off making pipe bombs to maim or kill innocent people.

*Benjamin Radford is a writer and Managing Editor of the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER.*

## Rise of the Raélians: Flying Saucers, Science, Sex, and Religion

In 1973 Claude Vorilhon, then twenty-seven and editor of a minor auto racing magazine, was (he says) taken onto a flying saucer while hiking in the dish of a French volcano in a wooded area in France. There he met a four-foot humanoid extraterrestrial with olive-colored skin, almond-shaped eyes, and long dark hair. The first words he heard from the humanoid was a question whether he regretted not having brought his camera. For the next six days, Vorilhon had conversations with the extraterrestrial, who explained that humanity had been created by means of DNA manipulation by beings known as the Elohim—a Biblical term, usually translated as God, but which actually meant “those who came from the sky.” Past prophets including Moses, Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammed had been given their revelations and training by the Elohim who had selected them. The reason for the present mission was to remove previous distortions in the interpretation of their message and to get to know their creations on equal terms and to demystify “the old concept of God.” Vorilhon, who then took the name of Raël, had been selected to pave the way for a second coming of the creators from outer space. This required teaching all humans the Raëlian beliefs, which emphasized peace, tolerance, a love of science, and sexual freedom. The question is what kind of science?

Vorilhon began teaching the “true” account of the creation of humans and as of this writing claims to have about 50,000 followers in eighty-four countries. Most of the believers are in French-speaking areas of Europe and Canada. Vorilhon, however, modestly says that only about 10 percent of his followers are active members. In the small farming community of Valcourt (northeast of Montréal) the group has established UFOland as their headquarters and embassy to the world. The building itself is part office complex and part museum. For two weeks every summer Raëlians gather there for meetings and meditation.

In 1998 Vorilhon announced to his followers that the alien creators of Earth would soon return to Earth and it was necessary to expedite preparations for this second coming. One of the essential first steps was the recruitment of a number of young women members into the Order of the Angels to serve as hostesses and sexual mates for the arriving progenitors of humans. Within this order was a select group who agreed only to sleep with the aliens and their prophets, including of course Vorilhon. Vorilhon, however, emphasizes that the angels are under no pressure to sleep with him, since the Raëlians teach sexual freedom and not coercion.

The movement thrives on media attention and Vorilhon deliberately seeks it out, especially on sex issues. For example, to protest a 1992 decision in Quebec barring condom machines at certain Quebec high schools, the Raëlians passed out condoms to students from a van adorned with large spaceships. The group also bought billboard space in Toronto to welcome extraterrestrial visitors. Vorilhon also makes pronouncements about some world-shaking events which will take place but which only true Raëlians will know of. Like others who make such statements, those which have become known

are sufficiently vague to meet almost any chance occurrence.

But it is the science part of the Raëlian agenda where the group seeks and gets publicity. After the cloning of the sheep Dolly in 1996, Vorilhon created a company, Clonaid, to do human cloning and help any gay or infertile couple have children for a \$200,000 fee. He then opened a post office box in the Bahamas and several of the women in the Order of Angels volunteered to serve as the proxy mothers. Most daringly and most troubling, he also moved into cloning when one of his followers, Brigitte Boisseler, who held two doctorates in chemistry, became the scientific director of Clonaid. Another follower, Mark Hunt, who had lost his ten-month-old son earlier, agreed to stock a lab to do DNA research and possible human cloning under the direction of Boisseler in Nitro, West Virginia, in the office building where his law firm was located. A more-or-less secret lab was being set up with equipment for research into DNA and with an ultimate goal of cloning a human. When this secret effort found its way into the press through a television appearance by Boisseler, the lab was closed by Hunt who complained that Boisseler was more a “press hog” than a researcher. She still maintains she has an interest in human cloning, and so apparently does Vorilhon.

Just how serious the effort might be is uncertain, and it is complicated by the fact that Vorilhon bragged he got millions in media publicity from his stunt. More importantly he attracted congressional attention. Rep. James C. Greenwood (R-Pennsylvania), as chairman of a House Energy and Commerce subcommittee, invited Raëlians to testify before his committee last year as he prepared legislation to ban any cloning that would produce children. Vorilhon, who appeared as an expert witness in a white jumpsuit with his hair tied atop his head in a knot, testified that people one day would clone themselves and then download their personalities into the clones, achieving a kind of eternal life. Greenwood later said that Vorilhon's



testimony convinced lawmakers that “even kooks may have the capacity to make human beings” and that it was necessary to act against cloning.

Clearly, Vorilhon was used by the anti-cloning forces to emphasize the potential dangers of cloning without really giving it a fair hearing. Vorilhon agreed he was used, but held that the publicity was worth it and that his organization was growing. What bothers his critics the most is that in spite of his publicity stunts, his belief in flying saucers, his free love, is that he claims to be a scientist and that his religion is based upon it. Worst of all, the anti-cloning forces use him as an example of science at work.

—Vern Bullough

Vern Bullough is an adjunct professor of nursing at the University of Southern California and SUNY Distinguished Professor Emeritus.

## Controlled Study Finds No Efficacy for St. John's Wort in Major Depression

The lead News & Comment article in our May/June 2002 issue reported that a major, multicenter, controlled study of the effectiveness of St. John's Wort in treating major depression was undergoing final peer review and about to be published.

That study has now been published, in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (287 [14]: 1807–1814, April 10, 2002). The results are not good news for advocates of the herb's value in treating depression.

“This study fails to support the efficacy of *Hypericum perforatum* [St. John's Wort] in moderately severe major depression,” the authors conclude. “The result may be due to low assay sensitivity of the trial, but the complete absence of trends suggestive of efficacy for *H. perforatum* is noteworthy.”

The double-blind, randomized, placebo-controlled trial was conducted in twelve academic and community psychiatric research clinics in the United States. It involved 340 adult outpatients with major depression. Patients were randomly



assigned to receive St. John's Wort, a placebo, or sertraline (as an active comparator) for eight weeks. After eight weeks patients could continue with blinded treatment for another eighteen weeks.

Of the two primary outcome measures, neither sertraline nor St. John's Wort was significantly different from the placebo.

At the American Association for the Advancement of Science meeting in February in Boston, the study's principal investigator, Jonathan R.T. Davidson, M.D., of the Duke University Medical Center, described the study protocol as “a kind of model for studies of depression.” He said it overcame limitations and uncertainties of earlier studies.

The study results were reported in *JAMA* by Davidson and twenty-five colleagues at the twelve research clinics, comprising the Hypericum Depression Trial Study Group.

“We have found no evidence for a superior effect of hypericum relative to placebo,” say the authors. “*Hypericum* should not be substituted for standard

clinical care of proven efficacy, including antidepressant medications and specific psychotherapies, for the treatment of major depression of modern severity.”

The research was funded by the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine and the National Institute for Mental Health.

—Kendrick Frazier

Kendrick Frazier is Editor of the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*.

## Eloquence on Western Medicine, Alternative Medicine

A colleague of mine at Old Dominion University (Martha Walker, associate professor of physical therapy) has written one of the most eloquent letters about alternative medicine that I have seen. This was written to the ODU Courier as a rebuttal to a letter in favor of Deepak Chopra's recent appearance at Old Dominion University, sponsored by the Continuing Healthcare Education Center of the College of Health Sciences. Professor Walker has given me her permission to submit her letter to CSICOP for possible publication.

—Larry Weinstein, Associate Professor of Physics, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA 23529



*A shortened text of Walker's letter follows:*

### Letter contained 'mistaken idea about both science and Western medicine'

In her letter to the editor on March 22, Amanda Damron states that the "scientific attitude relies on the Western medical model of always 'prescribing' a scientific cure (either pills or surgery) for the symptoms." This is a mistaken idea about both science and Western medicine.

I and many other faculty members in the College of Health Sciences have worked with patients as an integral part of Western medicine for more than twenty years. What we do cannot be summarized as "pills or surgery." I wonder how Ms. Damron can work alongside us and then dismiss us so readily. Does she really think that we do not offer

hope or compassion or improvement in quality of life? Does she think we are cold, mean people because we practice Western-based medicine? Where does that stereotype come from?

Western medicine has been trying for years to get the average American to eat right, exercise regularly, floss, get enough sleep, stop smoking, and deal with stress. Can anyone have missed the massive public health campaigns in this regard? As for science, it is not the opposite of caring. It is simply a methodical way of looking at the world without regard to the subject that is being looked at. Western medicine has aspirations of being scientifically based, but no one would say that we have arrived yet. Health care is a work in progress.

You will find that when Western medicine has, using the scientific

method, found a good solution for an illness, the alternative therapies addressing that illness disappear. For example, if you were exposed to anthrax would you scoff at mere "pills" for treatment? I think you would welcome the Cipro. For arthritis, however, we don't have such a great solution. Physicians usually recommend a combination of pills, exercise, weight loss, and, finally, surgery. In this area, there are loads of alternative therapies. These alternative therapies will continue to thrive until scientific method finds a really good solution to arthritis. And what if one of the alternative therapies is a good solution to arthritis? Scientific method can be used to investigate it and show its effectiveness!

—Martha Walker, Associate Professor of Physical Therapy

## Stephen Jay Gould 1941–2002

Skeptical inquirers deeply regret the passing of Stephen Jay Gould. He played a unique role in the public square, for he was an eloquent exponent of the scientific outlook. His prolific writings and brilliant lectures at Harvard and universities far and wide on evolutionary paleontology and biology and his forthright criticisms of creationism cast him as a powerful defender of science. At a time when pseudoscientific and fringe claims continue to grow, there are all too few scientists willing to enter into the fray.

Gould's death leaves a void and it dramatizes anew how important it is to have popularizers of science. This role was played by Carl Sagan and Isaac Asimov, CSICOP Fellows of the past. We need to encourage new and daring defenders of science, gadflies in the name of critical inquiry; interpreters able to extend the public's understanding of science and its methods. All too few scientists and scholars today are willing to venture beyond their specialties in order to communicate with a wider audience.

Gould offered his own often controversial theories on how evolution occurred—such as his punctuated equilibrium hypothesis—and he suffered criticisms as a result. A veteran polemicist, he stood his ground in many debates with scientific colleagues. Throughout,

Deborah Feingold/Getty Images



he demonstrated that science grows by constant questioning and peer review.

Stephen Jay Gould was a Fellow of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal and a recipient of its highest "In Praise of Reason" award. He was a frequent speaker at our conferences. He will be sorely missed.

Paul Kurtz  
Chairman, CSICOP

## Kansas Scientist Who Fought Creationists Honored by American Physical Society

Adrian Melott, the University of Kansas professor of physics and astronomy who led the successful fight against creationist-led anti-evolution education standards in Kansas, has been honored by the American Physical Society.

Melott, a founding board member of Kansas Citizens for Science, received the American Physical Society's Joseph A. Burton Forum Award during the spring APS meeting April 20–23, 2002, in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The award honored his efforts leading to reinstating quality science education standards in Kansas.

His Burton Forum Award citation reads:

"For his outstanding efforts in helping to restore evolution and cosmology to their proper place in the K-12 scientific curriculum. As both a distinguished cosmologist and a respected member of the clergy, he played a key role in helping the people of Kansas reverse their State Board of Education's anti-science action."

Melott, a Fellow of the American Physical Society and a prominent cosmologist, gave two talks at the APS meeting. He also gave a special public talk titled "Intelligent Design is Creationism in a Cheap Tuxedo" April 22 in Albuquerque. That talk was sponsored by three New Mexico science organizations: the Coalition for Excellence in Science and Math Education, New Mexicans for Science and Reason, and the New Mexico Academy of Science.

## Conspiracy Book About Sept. 11 Attacks a Best Seller in France

The president of the French leftist organization Réseau Voltaire, Thierry Meyssan, is rising to worldwide recognition as the auteur one of France's best-selling books: *L'Effroyable Imposture* (*The Frightening Deception*). Meyssan claims that the destruction at the Pentagon on

September 11, 2001, was not caused by the impact of hijacked American Airlines Flight 77, but rather a truck bomb. He alleges that the U.S. government covered up this fact from the world as part of a larger scheme by the U.S. military-industrial complex to covertly orchestrate the September eleventh massacres in order to justify the campaign in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the Middle East.

Although sales have been brisk, it is uncertain how many French readers actually buy into Meyssan's claims. He jump-started the book's popularity in an appearance on the French TV information talk show *Tout le Monde en Parle* (*Everybody's Talking About It*). However, the more respectable French media have been unforgiving in their criticism. According to the weekly journal *Le Nouvel Observateur*, "The theory suits everyone—there are no Islamic extremists and everyone is happy. It eliminates reality." *Liberation* renamed the book "A Frightening Confidence Trick" and called it "a tissue of wild and irresponsible allegations, entirely without foundation."

An English-language synopsis of Meyssan's arguments is available on a Web page titled "Pentagon: Hunt the Boeing and Test Your Perceptions!" at [www.asile.org/citoyens/numero13/pentagone/erreurs\\_en.htm](http://www.asile.org/citoyens/numero13/pentagone/erreurs_en.htm).

The Web page suggests that an early, misinformed report by the Associated Press was the true explanation and that subsequent corrections are actually part of a coverup: "As everyone knows, on 11 September, less than an hour after the attack on the World Trade Centre [*sic*], an airplane collided with the Pentagon. The Associated Press first reported that a booby-trapped truck had caused the explosion. The Pentagon quickly denied this. The official U.S. government version of events still holds."

Meyssan assumes that the impact of a

Boeing 757, weighing 100 tons and laden with fuel, would have caused far more damage to the Pentagon. The "hole" from the impact seems too small to him, and the most dramatic devastation didn't penetrate far enough into the "rings" of the building for his satisfaction. Where Meyssan has acquired the expertise to determine how much damage an aircraft can do to large buildings is an open question. Given the enormous death toll, the collapse of the roof and structure on the outermost ring and the incineration and damage to the outer three rings, a critic can only wonder what degree of damage would seem plausible to Meyssan.

Meyssan also muses about a lack of

wreckage from the airliner, ignoring the experts' explanation that such a high-speed impact and the subsequent explosion and inferno amply explain how the Boeing jet was pulverized and incinerated.

Meyssan shows no inclination to offer an alternative that explains key questions, such as what happened to Flight 77 and high-profile passengers like Barbara Olson, TV commentator

and wife of Solicitor General Ted Olson, if they *didn't* crash into the Pentagon.

Thus the Pentagon attack is added to the rumors and conspiracy theories following the Sept. 11 attacks. In a war in which truth and reality mix easily with rumor and deception, Meyssan's book can only fuel mistrust.

### Further Reading:

The Urban Legends Reference Pages: [www.snopes2.com/rumors/pentagon.htm](http://www.snopes2.com/rumors/pentagon.htm).

Time Europe Magazine: [www.time.com/time/europe/magazine/article/0,13005,901020520-237165,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/europe/magazine/article/0,13005,901020520-237165,00.html).

The National Review: [www.nationalreview.com/robbins/robbins040902.asp](http://www.nationalreview.com/robbins/robbins040902.asp).

—Kevin Christopher

Kevin Christopher is Public Relations Director for CSICOP. □

