

Keith Henson Talks about Memetics, Evolutionary Psychology & Scientology

By RU Sirius
February 5th, 2007

I interviewed Keith Henson for the NeoFiles Website (disbanded in favor of the NeoFiles Podcast Show) back in 2003. I figured with Henson's recent arrest on charges related to his battle with Scientology, people would be interested in a broader view of Henson. In this interview, we talk about a range of topics, finally ending with a discussion on his thoughts about his problems with Scientology at that time. The interview appears below in full, including the title and introduction:

Exile On Meme Street: Keith Henson Interview

Keith Henson is sort of an ur-transhumanist. In the 1970s – ‘80s, he was one of the founders and leaders of The L5 Society, an organization dedicated to building homes in high orbit using raw materials from the lunar surface. The L5 group attracted the interests of those seeking practical solutions to predicted resource scarcities, among them K. Eric Drexler. Henson formed a friendship with him, and was among his contacts as Drexler was conceiving nanotechnology

Once Henson was convinced that nanotech was feasible, he became a member of Alcor, an organization advocating and providing cryonic services. In the late 1980s, he became associated with the much-storied Extropy Institute, a transhumanist organization that was the subject of substantial media coverage during the cyberculture hype of the 1990s.

But none of this work brought Henson as much notoriety — or heartache — as his conflict with the Scientologists.

It all started when the Scientologists tried to close down alt.religion.scientology, a newsgroup that fostered open discussion of the church and its activities. When Scientology sued critic Grady Ward, Henson responded by posting a secret church document, “NOTs 34,” which Henson claimed was an instruction manual for criminal acts, including the practice of medicine without a license. He was successfully sued by the church who also got an injunction preventing Henson from supplying law enforcement agencies with a copy.

Protesting the death of two women in 2000 — Ashlee Shaner and Stacy Moxon — at the church's headquarters, Henson picketed that location. As a result, in April 2001, he was convicted in a California court of “terrorizing” the Scientologists. Henson was forbidden by the court (motions in limine) from bringing up either why he was picketing or Scientology's vindictive “fair game” policy. (The same kind of motions were used to forbid Ed Rosenthal in his more famous case from telling the jury he was acting for the City of Oakland growing pot for sick people.)

While visiting Canada — in bankruptcy and facing a year in prison as the result of court decisions — Henson made a spontaneous decision to seek refuge from our “neighbor to the north.” His request for refugee status is still pending in the Canadian refugee processing system.

I interviewed Henson via email about his personal evolution within the context of transhumanist philosophy.

RU SIRIUS: When did you first realize that you were a novelty-seeker?

KEITH HENSON: When I was about 8 years old. My mother read Robert A. Heinlein's Farmer in the Sky to me. I was enthralled and eventually read every published Heinlein (and many other SF authors) I could find. She could not have imagined that 25 years later I would be giving a paper at Princeton University, “Closed Ecosystems of High Agricultural Yield,” that was partly based on descriptions in Farmer in the Sky.

RU: What are some of the qualities that people can notice perhaps even in children that might indicate a progressive, neophilic potential?

KH: That's a hard one because most kids are interested in new things. The rare person is still interested in new advances when they are adults. There is possibly a correlation with intelligence. In any case, you have to be fairly bright to keep learning and changing attitudes as you get older.

RU: The L5 society received a lot of attention in the 1970s; after that, public interest or at least media coverage dissipated. Can you briefly tell my audience what the L5 society was about and what has happened with it in the intervening years?

KH: L5 was a group set up to promote space colonies and solar power satellites. It eventually merged with von Braun's National Space Institute forming the National Space Society, which still exists today —though the fire has certainly gone. You can get more background here.

RU: How did your participation and leadership in the L5 society come about?

KH: It was indirectly related to "Limits to Growth" memes that were so active in the early 70s.

In *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins discussed anxiety-provoking memes such as the hellfire meme — linked to the western religious memes by natural selection among memes. (The linking came about simply because the combination is more successful in gaining and keeping active meme spreaders for both memes.) Something like this happened to me linking the Limits to Growth (LTG) meme to the space colony meme. Dr. O'Neill's writings and early issues of the L5 News made the link explicit. (Princeton physics professor Dr. Gerard O'Neill generated the space colony concept with the assistance of his undergrads)

Personally, I found that the distasteful worldview implied by the Limits to Growth meme raised my anxiety level much like good hellfire sermon affects conventionally religious people. (It was much worse for the people in whom the LTG meme first arose. Rumor has it that one of them boarded himself up in a cabin in the remote woods and waited for the food riots to start and, for all I know, he may be there yet.)

Disaster memes like Limits to Growth capture the imagination and spread well. But only a small fraction of the population actively responds to threats as remote and indirect as those of the LTG meme. At that time, joining the Zero Population Growth organization and having a vasectomy were some of the few possible responses.

A small subset of those who were concerned, however, took the step of searching for a meme — or of creating a meme — that would counter the bleak LTG meme. Eric Drexler, for example, hunted down Dr. O'Neill in 1973 by asking questions of his professors at MIT about who was working on the exploitation of space resources. A copy of the first widespread space colony publication (the 1974 *Physics Today* article) was in my hands within hours after reaching Dan Jones (Ph.D. in Physics and occasional rock climbing partner) who knew of my interest in this topic.

The space colony meme reduced anxiety about the long-term future by providing an alternative, but it raised anxiety too. It was apparent from the start that we would have to work hard to bring about a world that included space colonies. Our beginning point was to infect all the people we could with the space colony meme. Inducing people to spend effort in spreading a meme, as well as successfully spreading itself in competition with innumerable other memes, is the definition of a successful meme. In this sense, the space colony meme was moderately successful. (Though it didn't lead to colonies in space.)

As for leadership, I am the kind who leads reluctantly and more by example than anything else. Someone had to be on the incorporation papers as president. After two years I fobbed it off on my former wife. In the sense that my thoughts on the subject had a lot of influence, I was a leader.

RU: I think you have to agree that the "Space Colony" meme lost some of its currency in terms of media coverage and general cultural excitement after the 1970s. Would you care to reflect on why that happened?

KH: In 1975 we expected a program (such as Solar Power Satellite) leading to space colonies would start by the early 80s, and that we could disband by about 1995. By 1985 it was clear nothing leading in that direction in space was likely to happen for a long time. The problem was mainly one of cost. Had the cost to get into space been proportional to the Pilgrims or the Mormon migration, we would have been there on our own, but it was about 10,000 times too expensive.

Memes lose their intense hold on people with the passage of time, especially when the promise of the meme is at great variance with reality. The Society carried on from inertia for a while before merging with the National Space Institute.

RU: Does cyberspace in some ways satisfy some of the needs and desires raised by space colonization?

KH: Perhaps. Games provide a lot of previously unknown "area" to explore. You can't live there yet though [ed. Today, we have Second Lives.]

RU: Do you still believe that the L5 plans laid out by O'Neill are the best bet for moving into space?

KH: Based on old technology, that of the middle of the last century, yes. I suspect that when people actually move off the planet they will do it with the awesome powers of nanotechnology.

RU: Many advocates of space colonization seem to have changed their focus to nanotechnology which, in turn, would make colonization less expensive and more feasible.

KH: I don't know that's the right way to put it. Nanotechnology will give us vast wealth in terms of control over the environment. It also might completely destroy us at either a physical level or just from giving us so much synthetic enjoyment we never bother going into space. Reducing cost or increasing wealth, colonizing space will become something an individual or a small group can do, provided we maintain the desire to do so.

RU: Moving forward a bit in time, did you consider yourself part of the Extropian movement and do you agree with their principles?

KH: I contributed to the early private extropian mailing list and seem to have had some degree of influence there, i.e., what Extropians and related transhumanists consider important is very close to what I consider important. I knew Max More through Alcor before he started the movement and was the (not very active) memetics editor for the magazine when it was in paper. I don't disagree with the principles, though they are perhaps a bit optimistic. On the other hand, my view is certainly colored by being driven out of the US.

RU: Do you consider yourself a utopian?

KH: No. I can't think of anyone who is up on evolutionary psychology and related areas who is deluded enough to be called a utopian. I think most of us consider staying out of ugly dystopian states is about as good as we can get — pre-Singularity, anyway. After that who knows?

RU: How did you enter into your epic battle with the Scientologists?

KH: It's a well-documented story.

I had mentioned scientology in an article or two but had taken no serious interest in it before January 1995. At that time Helena Kobrin, a lawyer for Scientology, issued a command (rmgroup) to remove the Usenet news group alt.religion.scientology from the Internet, apparently thinking that this "denial of service" attack on the Internet would end critical discussion about Scientology.

This attack on free speech backfired, having somewhat the effect of a gang of thugs riding into town and burning down the newspaper. This attempted censorship drew in dozens of Internet free speech advocates, me among them. A Google search on Kobrin rmgroup turns up hundreds of pages.

RU: How would you define the boundary between an organization that constitutes a "cult" and a group that simply shares a set of intentions and an overall memplex?

KH: There isn't a clear-cut boundary. Humans evolved in tribes and our reward circuits are still set up to reward behaviors that aided reproductive success in tribes. People still do things that reward them, such as socializing with others and doing things which gain the respect (and attention) of their associates just like they did 100,000 years ago when such behaviors were more directly connected to gaining the status needed to reproduce (i.e., obtain a wife or two … or three). Cults tap into this reward mechanism, but so does every other rewarding activity from local sports clubs to the Nobel Prize.

Still, you can say that some groups are cults. LaRouche's bunch, Moonies, scientology, Heaven's Gate, etc. There are published scales to measure how much some group is a cult.

RU: From your experience, do all organizations (like L5 or the Extropians) tend to accumulate cult-like behaviors over time?

KH: No. If anything, L5 lost the cult kind of intensity as it aged. I don't think the Extropians ever had even the level of the early L5 Society, but then I was not deeply involved with them.

If a group stays around long enough, it tends to lose its cult aspects. Religious cults tend toward main stream religions. Calvinism started as an intense cult. Heck, Calvin had a dozen and a half people publicly executed, something the scientology leadership would drool over, but 300 years later the Methodists are as mellow as you could ask for.

RU: Would you agree that there are quasi-religious overtones in the belief that we are headed towards a singularity; in the sense that it promises to resolve so many problems and existential dilemmas (sickness, death, material scarcity, other limits) that Salvation isn't too strong a word for the hopes that it evokes?

KH: It definitely has the potential to be the techno-rapture. It is deeply connected to SETI and the searches for planets around other stars. Oddly, the worse things look out there, the better they look here. The logic runs this way, if planets with life (and particularly life that eventually becomes technologically capable the way we are headed) are common then it looks really dire for us, because we don't see any evidence of a "tamed" universe. Everywhere we

look there are massive wastes of energy and matter. If technophilic civilizations are common, then something happens that removes them from the observable universe. Contrary wise, if the universe doesn't harbor any others inside our light cone, then we are looking at an unknown future instead of a deadly one. There isn't much hope for controlling the final stages; all we can do is build in as much good will as we can.

RU: How would you compare life in Canada to life in the US?

KH: Colder.

The cult seems to have less influence here. I suspect going back would be as disorienting as coming here in the first place. I understand the money doesn't look the same now and the US is talking about reinstating the draft. Plus there have been lots of changes — few of them good — since 9/11. If anyone wonders why the airlines are not doing well it is because flying has been made such an unpleasant and degrading experience.

NF: How can people help you to defeat this attack on your liberty and everyone's freedom of speech?

KH: It's really hard to do anything effective. The problem is that the individuals in law enforcement agencies know they will be targeted personally if they take steps against the cult's abuses and corruption. Not only by private investigators stealing their trash and stalking their children, but if they take action against the cult, Scientology will turn a scary part of the government against them by suing them in the courts. This fact of life was picked up in an episode of Millennium:

Peter: The Millennium Group's not interested in publicity.

Frank: No, no, it's not about us: in fact, he's working on a case that could be of great interest to the group. This Selfosophist was found…

Peter: Whoa, Selfosophy? No, no …

Frank: What is going on, Peter? We've never backed away from anything. We've even faced evil incarnate.

Peter: Evil incarnate can't sue. All I'm saying is be careful about what you say around your writer friend.

Starving Scientology of new members is perhaps the best we can do. To do that, inform yourself, inform your friends. If you really want to help, picket them.

Scientology has this "chosen people" status they got by intimidating or perhaps even blackmailing IRS management. A Jewish guy name of Sklar tried to get the same deal for his religious practice and was turned down. The judge in the appeal said that if what Sklar claimed about the IRS's treatment of Scientology was true, the IRS was violating the law and that someone should file a suit to put an end to that practice. It has been nearly two years and nobody has stepped up to file this invited lawsuit. The few lawyers who used to go up against Scientology will no longer do so because Scientology is just too good at using lots of money to pervert the courts. Put Rosen Exhibit 185 in Google to see a listing of \$35 million they spent over a few years to destroy critics. (Over a million on me.)

And if you want to understand how cults use the same brain reward pathway that drugs activate, go here to look at my paper on the subject.