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## Debunked

*Follow me to the end of the Earth. Then further.*

Revelations of Milinish

When they first called us a cult, it was an insult. Now I take it as a compliment. See? Even my enemies' barbs turn to roses. A cult, you say? Damn right we are, the best there ever was. We're the ultimate, the culminate. And it's all thanks to me, the accidental messiah.

Yes, it is I, Thomas Swan. Accept no substitute. I've decided to finally tell the story of how I formed the Milinish, and the glorious debacle that followed. And why, you ask? I'm just sick of the lies. Not from me, for I value truth above all things. It's the lies of others. The press, the government, and the pathetic ex-members who were too gutless to face the apocalypse with us.

That's what hurts the most. You expect the tabloids to lie, that's what they do. It's the betrayal of old comrades that gets me. See, I heard there's another book about the Milinish set to come out. It's by a young fool named David McHugh who was only with us a few months. McHugh? More like McWho? I'm racking my brains just to see his face.

It's not hard to guess the sort of book it is. It'll be one of those bullshit exposés. You know, 'how I was brainwashed and victimised by an evil cult,' that type of caper. The really outrageous thing is the title. *Milinish: The Inside Story*. The inside story? This clown has the audacity to write the history of the Milinish when I, Thomas Swan, can't even remember him. You might as well get some faceless Nazi private off the Russian front to write the inside story of the Third Reich. What a joke! So look, people, if you want the real inside story of the Milinish, listen to the guy who created it in the first place - me.

A word of warning, though, it isn't a very nice story. But why should it be? This ain't Sophie's world! No, you're in Tom's world now and a twisted place that is, to be sure. Still, the tale of the cult to end all cults is one that even the squeamish should hear. If there's a moral of the story for you surviving humans, it's to ponder the kind of spiritual climate in which something as mad as Milinish could arise in the first place.

Some will find this tale disturbing, others will find it amusing. Most of all, it's enlightening. Yet enlightenment comes at a cost. I had to steal your children to make you listen to me, and

they aren't coming back. No, the children are mine, and with the likely fallout to follow publication of this account, it's kinder to take them with me. With me? Where are we going then? Into the great void of non-being, the vast caverns of extinction that are the destination of all. One day you'll join us there.

Before we proceed, let us clear up the important matter of pronunciation. Come on, it's really not that hard. Once and for all, it's M'linish with the emphasis on the *in*. The first syllable is not stressed, it's just a short stab as in m'lord. Have you got that? It's not melon-ish, but mer-*lin*-ish. The name has no great meaning, it's just a corruption of the phrase 'my lineage' that struck me in an idle moment. When events took the surprising turn they did, I was stuck with it.

I am thirty-nine years old as I write this, and I was thirty-three when the Milinish began. Of my life before that time - school, family, work - I will not speak, but the press has already described me as a drifter who went from job to job after dropping out of uni.

Technically, they are correct, and so what? I may have rejected formal schooling, but I got my learning elsewhere. There's no denying I dabbled in many pursuits along the way, some noble, some nefarious, but wisdom was never gained by sticking to the straightest paths. I've been many things - artist, traveller, entrepreneur. Just before the Milinish, I was playing guitar in a rock band, but I won't go on about my earlier life here. Most of you humans are too self-centred to pay attention for more than two minutes so let's cut to the chase, which was about the time I wrote my first book.

Please don't think I have always been a cynic. When *Old Religion, New Science* came out, I was still a young man, full of the idealistic belief I had something important to give the world. The book was directly sparked, so to speak, by a mystical near-death-experience in my own home.

I was living alone in a one bedroom flat in Bronte, a beach suburb in Sydney, Australia. One fine morning I was about to have a blast on my electric guitar when I got a blast of a very different kind. When it comes to replacing frayed electrical cords, you really shouldn't procrastinate. *I'll do it next week*, I thought as I shoved the cord into the back of the amp and got the shock of my young life. It was very nearly over for Tom Swan right then and there. I copped a piercing dose of voltage and dropped my guitar.

With an agonised shriek, my consciousness fled from my body. Next thing I knew, I was rushing through space towards a vast fiery triangle out among the stars. As I neared the triangle, a thousand voices and images reached me, all in an instant. Then there was an explosion of light and I was back in my body.

As I lay humbled on the floor of my little flat, a revelation came to me with complete certainty. I was an immortal soul who had lived before, I was divine, and after death I would return to my true home in the hereafter. I was not alone in this. In fact, every person alive was a spiritual being visiting the planet in physical form.

A profound cosmic awareness enveloped me. I felt the presence of all Earthly beings: the beauty, the hunger, and the love. If only everyone could share this awareness there would be an end to suffering. It was up to me to show the way. I'd use my spiritual vision to start a new science of mental health and unite the planet.

Now that I had the truth, it had to be communicated to the world at once. I stood up, walked to my desk, and immediately began to write my great book, *Old Religion, New Science*. It was the story of my life, my death, and my vision for humanity. What a glorious future awaited the world when it learned the truths gained from my near-death-experience.

How naive those hopes seem now, yet at the time there was no doubt about the importance of my revelations. Here, finally, was proof of life after death. I wrote the book in an extraordinary burst of creativity over seven days, working up to eighteen hours a day. In that unstoppable frame of mind, and using contacts gained during my time as an entrepreneur, I signed a deal with Millennium Books, a 'New Age' and self-help publisher. Sure, I had to chip in for the costs, but so what? I gladly paid them extra just to hurry things along. Like a man inspired, I rushed through the publishing process until the book was out. Then, bristling with expectation, I returned to the solitude of my Bronte flat and waited for the book to sell and to change the world.

It did neither. To my dismay, my little work of genius sold barely a dozen copies. So to the twelve people who bought the book, thanks. To the rest of you, thanks also - without your stupendous apathy I would never have gone on to form the Milinish!

Wisdom comes with hindsight, however, and at the time I was aghast at the fate of my work. What use is it discovering profound truths if no one knows about them? The book sank without a ripple, although Millennium Books didn't seem to care. They assured me this wasn't unusual for a first time author and my second book would do better.

The reassurance meant nothing. It was clear the book was limping into oblivion, and with it the incisive wisdom of my vision. I can barely convey the sense of outrage that gripped me as the book continued to be ignored. It was this emotion, however, that led me on a circuitous route to ruin and then salvation.

The turning point came one evening after I made a visit to Spiral Architect, a New Age bookshop in the city. This was several years ago, of course, when there were still a few bookshops around the place. Not that it did me much good, because clearly my work continued to be shamefully ignored. Not a single copy had been sold during the week since my last visit. What's more, the moronic look of the shop's customers made me want to grab a copy of *Old Religion, New Science* off the shelf and slap their stupid faces with it. But I didn't do that. Instead, I went straight to the nearest pub and got blind drunk.

God only knows what tirades of retribution the poor patrons had to put up with that night. I must have stepped over the line at some point, because through the blur of that evening I do recall getting thrown out. I stumbled into a taxi and ended up at Bondi Beach. The last thing I remember is hurling an empty beer bottle into breaking waves, and from there it's a blank.

I woke in darkness on the sand. The tide lapping at my ankles prompted me to seek higher ground. I limped up to the parkland above the beach and made a bed under a park bench, complete with newspaper for blankets. My last thought before falling back to oblivion was the realisation I'd become a living cliché.

If any joggers had spotted me the next morning they may have thought, 'the apprentice winos are certainly getting younger.' Then they would have jogged by and got on with their smug, non-book-buying lives. Unfortunately for me, that was the high point of the day. It was all downhill from there.

The fact is a calamity was about to happen - but it was also a miracle from the Lord above. He truly moves in mysterious ways, for he spoke to me that day through a newspaper. That in itself was a minor miracle. Last century, the winos had it easy - there were papers everywhere. With everything online now, newspapers truly were thin on the ground these days. And yet the good Lord chose to speak to me through this antiquated medium.

It happened like this. As the violent rays of a new dawn began to wake me, I opened my eyes and wondered where the hell I was. My bedroom had certainly changed since the day before. Then it all came flooding back - the book, the pub, the waves, the whole debacle of the night before.

It seemed advisable to ease my way back to consciousness, one sense at a time. Let's see, there were five of them weren't there? Taste (ugh, dry mouth), touch (ugh, wet grass, hard ground), hearing (ugh - traffic). Three duds, better try sight. I decided to focus on the fine print of the newspaper which had warmed me in the night. That way I'd be able to gently coax my awareness through the post-alcohol minefield of that morning.

My eye drifted over the front page. It was the usual rubbish - money, war, fear-mongering and the like. It was nothing but conflict - no wonder I never followed the news these days. But as I flicked through the rest of the newspaper, my eye was drawn to a small article at the bottom of page 13, I was stung into wakefulness by something amazing - mention of my book, the very book which had triggered the calamitous events of the night before.

Surprise turned to dismay when it became clear the mention was anything but flattering. The news item was headed 'Scientist Slams Dummies.' Some guy named Rudolph C. Orantor had chosen my book as an example of the growing number of non-scientific works masquerading as science. I learned that the full article appeared in the latest edition of *Real Science* magazine. Sickened and stunned, I went straight to a newsagent, and paid money to find my spiritual vision vilified in print. Here is the article in full.

## Science: Dinkum, Dumb, and Dodgy

by Rudolph C. Orantor.

I am not the first person in recent years to lament the low level of scientific literacy in society, or the depiction of scientists in pop culture as either lunatics or socially inept nerds. But when a recent survey shows that nearly fifty percent of adults believe in some form of religious creationism, questions must be asked about the type of future we are creating for our children. Are they to inherit a world where astrologers are more valued than astronomers, and faith healers are preferred to medical practitioners? Whatever happened to modern science?

Somebody recently sent me a book which exemplifies the whole problem. Thomas Swan's *Old Religion, New Science* is the sort of pseudoscientific nonsense I would normally ignore, but the credence now given to such questionable publications forces me to examine it with a somewhat sterner eye.

Mr Swan claims to have 'written this work in a burst of revelatory vision over a seven day period,' causing one to wonder if he actually wrote it in six and took the seventh off as a day of rest. Whatever Mr Swan's working methods, he advances some highly dubious claims. Not only does he purport to have survived death and found proof of reincarnation, he also implies possession of the full range of psychic abilities - precognition, clairvoyance and the rest of the usual suspects.

Unfortunately, Swan's work demonstrates, by default, the strength of the scientific method. Where is the thought-out hypothesis tested under controlled conditions; the careful and cautious piecing together of the data; the cross referencing with previous findings in any area of study; the rigorous skepticism applied to one's findings? More simply, where is the evidence? Not only does Swan apply no critical perspective to his 'revelations,' he fails to satisfy that small and inconvenient need for evidence in support of his extraordinary claims. All the reader gets are assertions, and it is with dismay that one realises most readers will accept these assertions as uncritically as they are given.

Is our species to revert to a Middle Ages mentality where charlatans rule the credulous? Are we, some time down the road, to face the prospect of Mr Swan's 'science' being taught in schools? Are we 'evolving backwards'? We, the science community, are at risk of becoming obsolete in a world that ever reaches for the quick fix, the easy answer. It is high time that not only do we collectively raise the public perception of scientists, but also the level of real science education in the wider community. Otherwise, we are headed for a new dark age. So strongly do I feel we are under threat, it is necessary to adopt a more forceful tone than is customary for this journal. The mentality that produced *Old Religion, New Science* is deluded. It is dangerous, it is irrational, and it must be combated before civilisation falls into decay.

Thud! My morale hit the pavement and bounced into the gutter. So much for my efforts to help humanity. But the immediate question was, why me? Why my book out of the hundreds of New Age or religion books out there? Maybe because I had the audacity to use the word ‘science’ in the title. Yes, that must have been what stirred up old Orantor, who after all was a ‘real scientist.’ I slunk off home to my little flat and collapsed onto the bed.

You may wonder why I did not shrug my shoulders and dismiss Orantor’s words as simply the opinion of one man against another. Did I have so little faith in my own vision? The sad truth is that in those pre-messiah days I still had enough self-doubt to see another person’s point of view. Perhaps if the hangover wasn’t so bad, I wouldn’t have taken it as hard, but the rest of that day I could barely rise from my bed of gloom. What if Orantor was right and my great insights were no more than deluded fantasies? I re-read his article obsessively, seized by humiliation and even remorse.

I lay bedridden all day and half the night. At 3am, I rose from my sickbed and wandered city streets as a penance. I searched my spirit for guidance, but nothing came. No visions, no lights, no wise words. There was only emptiness and the growing suspicion Orantor was right.

The next day I conceived a response. I resolved to confront my nemesis head on, at least intellectually. It turned out Rudolph C. Orantor was an author himself. Indeed, he almost seemed to have his own shelf at the local bookshop. There was no doubt about it, old Rudolph C had the pop science market by the throat! If he wasn’t holding forth on evolution, he was pontificating on physics. One minute he was glorying in the history of science, the next he was waxing lyrical on the origin of humanity and the universe itself. No topic was too large or small to escape the supreme scrutiny of Lord Orantor.

Perhaps it was excessive self-flagellation, but I bought them all and sat down to read. If my hope was to find signs of weakness, I was sorry to find that the man was no fool. In fact, in the light of his lucid conjecture, my own *Old Religion, New Science* began to seem profoundly unsound. The sense of dismay grew in me like a cancer.

Was Orantor right in judging my book to be hollow, sensationalist, and quite without foundation? It seemed he very well might be. It was clear now that my near-death-experience had been a delusion. My ‘revelations’ were nothing more than wishful fantasies based on a fear of death. It was Orantor, not I, who understood reality. The scientific worldview he described in his books was the correct one. The implications for me were immense.

My life was not, after all, a spiritual journey into matter. No, it came from the pairing of gametes in my mother’s womb after the evolution-driven fornication of my father and mother. That, it seemed, was my real genesis. Granted there was a larger context within the expanding universe and the evolution of life, but the specifics of me came down to the random coupling of one among millions of sperm with an egg. All my characteristics of body and ‘soul’ could be explained by the genetic material - the DNA - that formed them. That was why I was. And I should be grateful for having been that sperm, that one in a million chance. I should feel wonder at the miraculous complexity of it all, and seek to make

a saner and better world for all humanity. In facing up to the truth, I should feel renewed vigour and a sense of hope. Of course, Orantor was right.

There was just the small matter of my imminent demise.

Not - with any luck - next week or next year, but inevitably sometime in the next fifty years my services would be dispensed with and I would return to the earth from where I came. This regrettable mortality could perhaps be overcome by having children. There was - apparently - some consolation in knowing that while I would die, my DNA would live on in the form of descendants. Somehow, a hollow feeling remained at the thought that this complex genetic machinery would discard me into the pit of history. Yet it was clear that Orantor was right - there was no evidence for anything else and it was wishful thinking to conclude otherwise. I had simply been wrong.

If only Thomas Swan had been a good loser.

I have in my time flung chessboards, abused racquets, and violently torn up losing betting slips. Once I hurled a golf club fifty feet skyward where it lodged in the upper branch of a tree to surprise passing golfers for the rest of the day. Now, having been humiliated by Orantor, I began to pace deliriously around my tiny flat.

I had been debunked by science to add insult to the injury of being ignored by the New Age community. Deep in the seething resentful chemicals of my brain, a terrible revenge bubbled up into some half-formed impulse.

If religion was no more than an institution for achieving social control, perhaps it could be inverted to achieve chaos. And if it was true, as science said, that I was just a piece of physical debris flung out in the wake of an ancient and accidental explosion, then I might as well wreak as much mayhem as possible before returning to nothingness. If Orantor wanted to paint me as a religious crank, I'd give that learned gentleman all that and more - a caricature of all the beliefs of the world in their chaotic and meaningless glory.

And in that moment, the Milinish was born.