

Dr. Gul Lem's Report

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An investigator's report on an alien race confronting a planetary health problem and the emergence of a new religion.

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DR. GULL LEM'S REPORT

by Charles Schwenk (with apologies to Jonathan Swift)

To the Research Center:

From Dr. Gul Lem:

This report attempts to summarize our knowledge about the first society we have discovered on another planet, the planet we have designated 127-XB. I will discuss the information we have gathered about the individual these people call The Tall Man and the cult he has founded. Further, I will assess the claims that some of the tenets of this cult show evidence of unauthorized contact by people from our planet with the aliens.

A brief summary of our historical relationship with the aliens will provide context for my recommendations. After first contact, some of us showed a strong but inappropriate affection for the inhabitants of planet 127-XB. Being only six inches tall and somewhat similar to us in appearance, it cannot be denied that the aliens are "cute" but this in no way justifies the treatment they received at our hands. The fact that thousands of them were transported to our planet and kept as pets can only be a source of shame for us. It was only when they eventually began to kill their owners in clever ways that our scientists investigated their intelligence and discovered it is probably equal to our own. The subsequent decision to suspend all contact with the people of 127-XB and rely on information gathered secretly seems sound. Fortunately, the descendants of some of the individuals kept as pets have agreed to return to their planet and act as information gathering agents for us.

The aliens still living on 127-XB are technologically primitive but are progressing rapidly. Two hundred years ago they developed a complex new food from a large number of native plants. This food makes them much stronger, faster, and smarter than they were before and thus they have been able to build bigger cities, farm more effectively and do many other things that have led to great improvements in their quality of life. The new food spread gradually and a majority of their people still do not have access to it but they are working to develop it on a larger scale and it is becoming more widely available.

Despite its obvious benefits, the new food has one serious drawback. It causes people to excrete a gas that requires decades or centuries to break down and, as a result, concentrations in the atmosphere continue to increase. The experiences of unfortunate individuals exposed to high concentrations of the gas, for example, those who must work with large numbers of others in enclosed spaces, shows that the effects are serious and are dose-dependent. If concentrations are high enough, people begin to run a fever. Eventually the fever becomes debilitating and can cause death. These facts have been recognized for over a century by those who

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hold positions in their society roughly equivalent to those we call medical specialists and public health officials in our own. Only recently, however, has the problem become severe enough to stimulate a public debate among the aliens.

The people have developed ways to measure individuals' temperatures relatively precisely by exploiting the fact that substances expand when heated. A rubbery secretion from a plant is placed in the mouth and is measured to determine their body temperature. They have been using this method for over 100 years and now virtually everyone agrees that individuals' average temperature has been increasing as more of the food has been produced and consumed on the planet. Approximately 100 years ago, when we first made contact, we taught them how to measure concentrations of gas in the atmosphere. Since then, it has been proven to everyone's satisfaction that the concentration of the gas in their atmosphere has increased. However, people disagree about whether this increase is due to increased consumption of the food.

The population has divided into two factions. The first group advocates the reduction in consumption of the food in order to reduce the gas emissions. This will probably result in people becoming weaker, slower, and less intelligent, though the members of this first group deny this. The second group favors the development of new food additives (as yet undiscovered) to reduce the gas produced by the food so that people can continue to eat the same amount. They also advocate other adaptations like controlling the fever with ice.

The first group blocks any measures for adaptation because they believe these merely provide an excuse to avoid the difficult problem of mitigation. The other group blocks any efforts at mitigation because they believe they will not be cost effective and that resources can better be spent on adaptation.

I will refer to these groups throughout the report so I must decide how to name them. I would prefer to use the names they give themselves but those who advocate mitigation call their philosophy "The True Path" while the other side calls their philosophy "The Correct Path." It is more instructive to use the names they give each other. Those in the first group are called "Quitters" by their opponents to signify they advocate that the planet's inhabitants quit consuming the food but also that they have given up on the problems of finding ways to adapt to the effects of consuming it. The second group is called "Stinkers" because they advocate continuing to consume the food and excrete the gas it causes.

There are a few individuals who have not taken a side and thus are hated by both sides, each of which believes these individuals are working for the other side. Most keep quiet but there are a few who are vocal about their opinions. These include the members of the cult of the Tall Man.

Both sides cite scriptures written thousands of years earlier in support of their positions. Their holiest scripture, the Book of Flathragg states, "When people are faced with a change that threatens them, they must choose whether to remove the threat or adapt to it." There are heated debates on the meaning of this text. Wars have been fought over this topic and thousands have died in them.

The beliefs of both sides are passed on to children through the educational system. Schools in areas in which the majority of the people are Quitters typically teach that the tenets of the True Path are correct while those in areas dominated by Stinkers typically support the tenets of the Correct Path. Over the years, institutions devoted to promoting each side have developed and grown. There are now a great many individuals in the society whose job it is to promote the beliefs of each side. The society is devoting a large and increasing share of its resources to the support of these institutions.

The Tall Man

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In the midst of this polarized environment the cult of the Tall Man developed. His name in their language means literally "Taller by a head." I believe this name refers to the ability of this individual to see above the heads of those in the warring camps who are staring and shouting only at each other. Recently, the suspicion has grown that the tenets of this cult were actually given to these people by misguided individuals from our own planet because of the similarities between the Tall Man's tenets and the beliefs of some of our own religions. It is my job to determine whether this is true and if it is how we should attempt to mitigate the damage done by those who have illegally made contact and attempted to inappropriately influence this alien culture. If unauthorized contact has been made, I believe the individuals who have committed this criminal act had the best of motives; they wished to give the aliens the eternal truths of their own religion in order to save them from the consequences of their own ignorance and futile conflict.

Those who see suspicious similarities between this cult's principles and those of one or more of our own religions cite many examples, of which I have selected a few of the most convincing. First, the Tall Man preaches, "We are all basically members of the same family. Do not focus on the things that divide us. Focus on the things on which all siblings agree." The similarity between this statement and the beautiful words of the founder of at least one of our great religions should be obvious.

A second example is this statement, "All the things we perceive in this world are like shadows or bubbles in a stream. Thus, we perceive the truth in a distorted way, as if we were looking through a piece of dark Kasali glass. Thus, all the things we believe are only partial truths. Do not cling to any of them. However, if you make the right effort, someday you will see the truth clearly." The similarity of this statement to those of two or more of our own great religions should be obvious to all members of the Committee.

A third example concerns a story told by the Tall Man about a child of a wealthy family who leaves home, lives in squalor for many years, and eventually forgets who he is. By chance he returns to his home village one day and is seen and recognized by his overjoyed father, who restores his son's memory and lavishes gifts on him. This basic story appears in at least two of our great religions though the details differ slightly. Does its appearance in the Tall Man cult show evidence of outside influence or might the aliens have developed it by themselves because it reflects some basic truths about life on both their planet and ours?

Other examples come from stories about the Tall Man that are similar to those in stories about the founders of some of our own religions. One example is the story of the Kalpa seed, which is similar to our own Mustard seed. It is a very small seed that grows into a very large shrub, and so it provides a metaphor for spiritual development in at least two of our own religions.

According to the story, a woman came to the Tall Man whose son had just died of fever. She was driven mad by grief and became obsessed with discovering whether the excretions caused by the Food were responsible for his death, asking every person she met to tell her. One day, she encountered the Tall Man and asked him. He said he could not tell her because she had to come to her own truth but that he could make a potion to bring her son back to life if she would bring him a small Kalpa seed from a home in which no one identified themselves as being on the side of the Quitters or the Stinkers. In searching, she found many people who wanted to tell her why their side was right but no one who had not taken a side.

After awhile, she returned to the Tall Man and told him she had not been able to find anyone who had not taken sides. He asked her, "Which side is right?" and she said "I do not know." He said, "Consider the beauty of those four words. In a world full of people who are certain they know the truth, my way involves admitting what we do not know. Life in the world involves making wise and careful choices without the comfort of knowing the right choice for certain."

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My final example comes from the following incident that was actually observed by one of our agents who had infiltrated the Tall Man's group of disciples. A drug has been developed that reduces the effects of breathing the excretions. However, because of the polarized political conflict surrounding the issue, the drug has been declared illegal. Quitters feel the drug will reduce peoples' efforts at mitigation while Stinkers feel use of the drug encourages people to believe that the gas is actually harmful. Both sides claim the drug has dangerous side effects but there is no real evidence that it does. A black market has developed and suppliers of the drug have divided into rival factions or gangs who often engage in brutal turf wars. The following is a transcript from our agent:

One day near the place where we were meditating, members of two gangs collected with weapons that are similar to what we call guns (The existence of these weapons among the aliens seems to indicate that some misguided individual from our own planet has provided them with the technology to produce firearms. Why aren't we investigating this apparent example of illegal contact though we are investigating possible illegal influences on the Tall Man's teaching?) They faced each other and were about to begin to fight. The Tall Man stood up and spoke to a senior disciple.

Tall Man: If I don't do something, there will be bloodshed.

Senior Disciple: Boss, I'm not sure it's any of our business.

TM: These people live around us. They are our neighbors and our siblings.

SD: What do you plan to do Boss?

TM: Walk over there and stand between them.

Junior Disciple: You can't do that. Look at their faces. They are not even animals anymore. They are Rage Demons. If you come between them they will kill you.

TM: My body and mind are impermanent and subject to decay. I must die one day.

JD: But Sir, you must not die today.

SD: (to JD) Young man, don't tell the Boss what to do. Instead, stand and watch.

(At this point, the Tall Man walked toward the gangs. The Junior Disciple looked down and wept.)

SD: Son, don't look away. Watch what happens very carefully. Whatever happens, you will want to remember it.

(At this point, the TM stood between two gang members with their weapons or guns pointed at each other. Both then pointed their guns at him.)

Gang Member 1: You better stand aside preacher. This fucker will kill you in a second.

(the TM stood still and silent)

Gang Member 2: Preacher, I have nothing against you. But if you don't get the fuck out of the way you are a dead man. You are looking at a man who can cut you down without blinking an eye.

TM: You are looking at a man who can be cut down without blinking an eye. Do you know who I am?

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GM2: Yes, Iâve seen you around with your disciples. (To GM1) You better get that gun out of this manâs face. What do you think his followers will do if you shoot him?

TM: Letâs ask them. (To disciples) Which of you will retaliate if this man kills me? (To SD) What will you do if either of these men kills me?

SD: Just what you taught me Boss. Develop loving kindness and direct it his way. If we fill up our minds with hatred for your killer, it is a little like drinking poison.

(At this point, the TM moved toward the second gang member, until his face was only a few inches from his gun.)

TM: Let me make this clear. If you shoot me, no one will retaliate. I need to ask you some questions. Why donât you both lower your guns.

(GM2 lowered his gun and GM1, after a moment, lowered his too.)

TM: Thank you both. (To the rest of the gang members). Why donât you all lower your guns. (Over a period of 60 seconds, they complied). Very good. If you all insist on treating guns as playthings, let me tell you one thing; remember it even if you forget everything else Guns...go off...by...accident. Now, down to business. (To GM1) Why does this man need killing?

GM1: He pissed on me and my boys. He disrespected our whole way of life. He wants to fuck with our livelihood. He wants to humiliate my boys.

TM: How does he want to do that?

GM2: Iâll tell you how. By cutting into our market share. By offering an inferior product at a cheaper price.

TM: (To GM2) Letâs hear your story. Why do you have to kill your opponent?

GM2: Why? It is actually quite simple. Because he stands in the way of progress. We want to offer our clients better service through an improved business model. But our opponents cling to the past and resist positive change.

GM1: Your lies cannot disguise the fact that you are trying to destroy our very way of life. We are ready to kill to protect ourselves and to die if necessary.

TM: What exactly are the changes your are talking about?

GM1: We subsist by providing a valuable service to our clients. For many years we have engaged in honest commerce and taken excellent care of them. Now, our enemies are eroding our client base in a most dishonorable manner.

TM: My disciples and I practice right speech, meaning that we speak plainly and truthfully. Now I must tell you both truthfully, neither of you are pursuing a noble goal. You are both nothing more than drug dealers fighting over territory. Is this true?

GM2: In a manner of speaking.

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TM: How much territory?

GM1: A few city blocks.

TM: A small territory of little value. Now I want you both to look carefully at your boys. These are your soldiers, your friends, your family. Are their lives worth a lot to you, or a little?

GM1: A lot.

GM2: A lot.

TM: Why are you about to sacrifice something of great value for something of little value? What drug have you been taking that is making you so crazy?

The drug is called Hatred. You know, Hatred is 1,000 times stronger than any drug you sell. You have to kick it right now. If you don't, look around at the faces of your friends, your boys, your family and know that after tonight you will never see some of them again.

I think you should find a solution to your problem that is not absolutely insane. There is a phrase I ask those who hang with me to repeat every day and now I want you to try repeating it a few times.

The phrase is this, "Even though we live around people who kill, we won't kill. Even though we are surrounded by people filled with hatred, we will live free from hatred."

According to the reports of our agent, the two gangs confronted by the Tall Man then resolved their differences without anyone being killed.

Evaluation

Some have suggested that because the Tall Man's aphorisms, stories, and behavior are similar to one or more of our own great religious leaders, he has been influenced by information illegally provided by individuals from our own planet. Is this true? If it is, who is to blame? Did one of the sincere believers in this religion give them the information? Did one of their own people who are acting as our agents do it? Did any of those we wrongly kept as pets pick up the aphorisms and stories and give them to their own people?

I must ask a more basic question, "Can the similarities be explained without assuming contact?" The only way any person can answer this question is by looking at the teachings of the cult mindfully and without the biases of the proponents of our own religions. I have sincerely tried to do this and I have come to the conclusion that these stories and aphorisms represent simple common sense. All intelligent social beings, whether they live on our planet or Planet 127-XB will develop these ideas simply as a way to live together and solve common problems. In other words, we need not assume the tenets of the cult of the Tall Man represent partial truth from our own religions. It would be more useful for us to study the Tall Man's words and actions to see if we ourselves have anything to learn from them.

If our own religions have inappropriately influenced the aliens, there are two opposing views on what we should do about it. The first is represented by the Interventionists. They argue that this illegal contact makes it necessary for us to intervene and attempt to influence their culture for the better. The other side is represented by the Isolationists. They say that this proposed intervention amounts to playing God. If my evaluation is correct, we may not need to take a side in this angry and bitter debate. I believe there are too

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many uncertainties to make intervention a good idea. We do not know whether any of our own religions influenced the Tall Man and we do not know what effects our intervention might have. If this cult survives on its own it may enable the people of this planet to develop rational solutions to the problems they have created for themselves.

In summary, I must say that I do not agree either with the Interventionists or the Isolationists. We should not intervene but we cannot isolate ourselves from this culture. The aliens may have something to teach us that we desperately need to know. We must remain in contact with them, not because we have to help them but because they may be able to help us, if we can find the humility to accept their help.

Respectfully,

Dr. Gull Lem

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