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Man behind 'Rapture pets' rescue admits it's a hoax

Adelle M. Banks Religion News Service | Mar. 22, 2012

The owner of a business who claimed he would provide atheist rescuers for Christians' pets left behind in the Rapture now says his service was an elaborate hoax and never had any clients.

Bart Centre, who lives in New Hampshire, came clean after the state Insurance Department delivered a subpoena because he appeared to be engaged in "unauthorized business of insurance" through his Eternal Earth-Bound Pets business.

"Eternal Earth-Bound Pets employs no paid rescuers," Bart Centre wrote in a blog post March 16. "It has no clients. It has never issued a service certificate. It has accepted no service contract applications nor received any payments -- not a single dollar -- in the almost three years of its existence."

Centre's business was reported widely by Religion News Service, NPR, *The Washington Post*, The Associated Press, CBS News, the BBC, Bloomberg Businessweek, The Huffington Post and other media outlets in the last year.

Centre's scam gained steam ahead of May 21, 2011, the day radio evangelist Harold Camping predicted the world would end. More recently, Centre told RNS that he was disappointed with Camping's March 6 announcement that he would no longer make predictions because they were good for business.

Asked Wednesday why he had announced the service in the first place, Centre said he considered it a "social experiment."

"How much do believers really buy into this?" he said he wondered. "How committed are they to their pets? How much do they trust atheists?"

He also said the venture was a "poke in the eye" to believers in end-times theology and a means to increase interest in his self-published book.

"It wasn't until the New Hampshire Department of Insurance said, 'Hey, we'd like you to come down and discuss insurance policies,' I said, 'Whoops, it's time for me do something,'" Centre said.

The subpoena, a copy of which Centre provided to RNS, requests a March 29 meeting and copies of applications for "'rapture' coverage." Its cover letter states, "It appears you are engaged in the unauthorized business of insurance in New Hampshire."

Richard McCaffrey, the compliance and enforcement counsel who delivered the subpoena, said the subpoena could be withdrawn but the investigation is continuing because of what he considers Centre's contradictory remarks.

"He was either lying to the newspapers or he's lying now," McCaffrey said.

McCaffrey noted the website for Eternal Earth-bound Pets, which includes advertisements about Centre's two "Atheist Camel" books, remains operational.

Centre said just two Rapture believers -- rather than his previously claimed 267 clients -- contacted him to sign up for his service. He said he told them he didn't have a rescuer close enough to their area to make a commitment.

"The last thing I wanted to do was start getting involved in actual contracts," he said, adding that he did not keep the names of the prospective clients.

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