

ASPIRING FOR THE STARS: HEAVEN'S GATE

An interview with Dr. Benjamin E. Zeller



The world became aware of a reclusive UFO religious group then calling itself Heaven's Gate on March 26, 1997, when 39 bodies of members who had committed suicide by poison and suffocation were discovered in a house in Rancho Santa Fe in San Diego County, California. Their leader, known at that time in the group as "Do," was Marshall Herff Applewhite (1931-1997). Applewhite and Bonnie Lu Nettles (1927-1985), known in the group as "Ti," had met in Houston in 1973. Convinced that they had a special role to play together in salvation events, they began to travel across the United States. While camping in Oregon they concluded they were the "Two Witnesses" predicted in the New Testament book of Revelation chapter 11. They concluded that they would be assassinated, resurrected, and then ascend to heaven in a flying saucer. They took a literalistic approach to interpreting the Bible and its prophecies, which they combined with beliefs derived from different Christian traditions, Theosophy, and ET-inspired religious movements and ideas. As their thought matured, they began teaching that Applewhite was the Second Coming of Jesus, who was visiting Earth again from The Level Above Human (T.E.L.A.H.), also called the Next Level, in order to locate individuals who were ready to overcome their human nature and ascend to T.E.L.A.H. They eventually taught that during their present visit to Earth, Applewhite had come with his Father in T.E.L.A.H., who was Bonnie Lu Nettles. Initially they attracted a small group of followers in Los Angeles. Calling themselves "Guinea" and "Pig" they began teaching that followers should abandon their families and join them in a nomadic lifestyle in order to learn to overcome all human desires and attachments. Followers were promised that they would transform their human bodies into eternal, genderless, extraterrestrial bodies, and that they would be picked up in flying saucers to enter into

T.E.L.A.H. In 1975, calling themselves “Bo” and “Peep,” they attracted over 30 converts in Waldport, Oregon, after giving a public lecture. When these persons left their families and jobs, the group received sensationalized news coverage. Sociologists Robert W. Balch and David Taylor posed as new members and traveled and camped with converts for a while, subsequently writing about the group. After being heckled while giving a talk in Kansas, Nettles announced, “The doors to the Next Level are closed. The harvest is closed.” The group became reclusive with members practicing monastic disciplines assigned by Applewhite and Nettles to their “class” so the students could overcome their humanness. They taught that entrance into the Next Level was achieved by persons “grafting” onto their Representative, their Older Member in T.E.L.A.H., who was Applewhite, making him the Father of the students. This concept of “grafting” was derived from John 15:5-11, the first verse of which reads, “I am the vine, you are the branches.” Applewhite and Nettles taught that in a previous age, Do had entered T.E.L.A.H. by grafting onto his Father, who was Nettles, thus making Ti the Grandfather of the present students in the class. The students cultivated an emotional attachment and dependence on Do and Ti as their spiritual Father and Grandfather. Nettles’ death in 1985 from cancer appeared to disconfirm the promise that they were transforming their human bodies into eternal extraterrestrial bodies. Immediately prior to the group suicide in 1997, the aging Applewhite believed he may be dying, and other members of the group had suffered health problems. The students in the class could not enter the Next Level without Do, nor would they want to do so in piecemeal fashion. When they heard the theory that a flying saucer was following behind the Hale-Bopp comet, they took this as a sign and decided they would abandon their human bodies in order to “exit” Earth to join Ti on the flying saucer and enter T.E.L.A.H.

Dr. Zeller, welcome to the WRSP Forum!

WRSP: Your 2010 book, *Prophets and Protons: New Religious Movements and Science in Late Twentieth-Century America*, contains two chapters on Heaven’s Gate. How did you become interested in the topic of new religious movements and science?

Zeller: When I was a child I wanted to be a scientist. I remember that my parents subscribed to *Science News*, which I read over breakfast in elementary and high school. The technical advances of the 1980s and 1990s really impressed me, particularly the discoveries of the “Big Science” projects, such as the Human Genome Project and the new particle accelerators. But more than just the science itself, I was interested in the human side of science and technology. *Fat Man and Little Boy* (1989), the movie about the Manhattan Project and the making of the first nuclear bomb, was a favorite of mine. So was science fiction, with its speculations on the place of science and technology in humanity’s future. I remember watching *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and wanting to know more about who designed the sentient computer HAL-9000, and how one could even have a self-aware conscious computer.

In college I fell into the study of religion—a story too long to tell here—and it was Heaven’s Gate in particular that first attracted me to studying new religious movements. One reason was that the big questions of science and technology that had long interested me seemed also to interest members of this group. It really wasn’t the end of Heaven’s Gate that captivated me when I first began studying it, but the beginnings, and how the adherents had managed to create a worldview that seemed to draw

from science, religion, science fiction, and alternative sciences all at the same time.

WRSP: What is the significance of science, or how is science used, in new religious movements?

Zeller: Science is the *lingua franca* of our times. Every successful new religious movement engages science in some way, and generally they do so in a systematic way. Susan Jean Palmer argued in her *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers: Women's Roles in New Religions* (1995) that new religions tend to offer clear teachings on gender that appeal to individuals looking for clarity, and that despite the diversity of these religions, each new religion offers only *one* set of clear guidelines. The founders and leaders of new religions do the same thing with science, offering one clear approach that seeks to resolve the questions that potential adherents bring to the group. But more than that, all such groups are in some way critical of the Western scientific establishment. They offer something better, some new way to bring science and religion together in the context of our modern world. That is part of the appeal of many of these groups, especially groups like Heaven's Gate, Scientology, and the Raelians.

WRSP: How did the leaders and members of Heaven's Gate relate science and scientific information to their religious worldview?

Zeller: Less than a year before the suicides, the members of Heaven's Gate made a videotape they titled *Planet About To Be Recycled*. They distributed it freely to anyone who asked, and in it they warned that the Next Level was about to terminate the current phase of Earth's civilizations. It always struck me that one thing Applewhite (Do) said in this video was, "This is as scientific, this is as true, as true could be. But you have to know me, you have to trust me, you have to believe me." Applewhite does two things there, and it is representative of the ways that members of Heaven's Gate engaged science more broadly. First, he equated science with truth. We do that in popular culture too, but it is surprising to see a religious leader make the same move. But second, he called for belief and faith in what he said, basically faith in the revelation that he claimed to possess. So science is truth, but it is also embedded within a religious frame of reference that requires acceptance of certain revelatory claims.

In *Prophets and Protons* I called this sort of move "radical but representative," since it mirrors what we see in broader religious culture. For many Americans, science is truth, but at the same time it is often in tension with and embedded within religious claims. Heaven's Gate went above and beyond the ordinary in incorporating what they thought of as science into their worldview and practices, but it was always within a religious frame of reference.

WRSP: Why did you decide to write *Heaven's Gate: America's UFO Religion* (2014)?

Zeller: I've been writing this book in bits and pieces since 1997, when I first studied the group in the wake of the suicides. I was driven primarily by the need to understand this group and its members. I had run across the group's postings to Usenet (a sort of Internet bulletin board system) in the year before the suicides, but had not given them any notice or attention. I do not even remember if I read the entire posts, which initially struck me as rambling and nonsensical. I, like most people, was dismissive.

After the suicides the popular reaction was also dismissal, and even more so, ridicule. But for 39 people to choose to end their lives demands explanation. Their choices to live for two decades in a

relatively closed religious community demand explanation. Their willingness to record messages for posterity wherein they conveyed their awareness that others would dismiss them also requires explanation. So I started trying to explain, even back in 1997.

The book represents the culmination of what I've found. The religious worldview that adherents and leaders of Heaven's Gate developed is a complicated one, but no more complicated than other religions. It draws from different sources and models, but so do other religions. Within this religious worldview, adherents possessed certain core beliefs and values, and engaged in particular practices. All this played out in a very specific history. That is the story the book tells.

WRSP: How does your study of the Heaven's Gate group differ from the earlier studies by Robert Balch and David Taylor?

Zeller: Balch and Taylor were primarily concerned with social dynamics of group members, which is important but it not the end of the story. I'll quote my friend Rob Balch directly, who wrote in the foreword to my book that he, "like other sociologists, was more concerned with the [social] actions themselves than with the beliefs on which they were based. But, as Zeller explains, Heaven's Gate was a true religion with a coherent system of beliefs that explained the order of the universe, gave meaning to human existence, and offered a plan of salvation" (xii). So Rob Balch and I are each interested in the same group, but from different perspectives. Our work complements each other.

I make extensive use of the research of Balch and Taylor. If they had not engaged in their study of the movement in its early years, it would be nearly impossible for us to know what happened on the ground as Heaven's Gate developed from two co-founders to several hundred members, then contracted. Their attention to the early history and the social dynamics of conversion, apostasy (de-conversation) and socialization within the group are formative. What I've done is taken that as a foundation and looked to how the group's religious worldview, beliefs, practices, and history developed both during and after that initial phase.

I should also mention that Rob Balch is the epitome of collegial. It is easy in our small academic world to feel a petty jealousy towards other scholars working on the same topic. Not Rob. Rob has always shared his wisdom, his experience, and his sources with me, and I've tried to reciprocate. The same is true of George Chryssides, a British scholar who has also worked on Heaven's Gate and edited the first academic book on the group. We've all shared materials and ideas with each other. George and I even went on to coedit a different book on new religions because we work so well together!

WRSP: What sources did you use in your research on Heaven's Gate?

Zeller: Lots! I have an entire Excel spreadsheet and a Zotero library full of sources! I started with the written, video, and audio sources that members and leaders of Heaven's Gate created. This includes their anthology—*How and When "Heaven's Gate" (The Door to the Physical Kingdom Level Above Human) May Be Entered*—both in its final form and a first draft that ex-members provided me. Other written sources include mailings that the group sent in the 1970s, Internet posts the group made, and their webpage. They produced over twenty hours of videos, and there are a few accessible audio recordings as well. I also used written statements and interviews given by members or ex-members from the 1970s through today, as well as interviews and oral histories that I produced with ex-members.

Finally, there are accounts by journalists, investigators, law enforcement, and other scholars that I used as well.

WRSP: What is the relationship of Heaven's Gate to American society and religions?

Zeller: It is American religion writ small. Go to your local bookstore and look at the books that are top-selling in the spirituality and religion section, or check Amazon.com. The topics are healing, angels, biblical prophecy, spiritual journeys, and channeled wisdom. These are precisely the issues that concerned members of Heaven's Gate, what drew them in, and the materials from which their founders drew in developing their religious worldview.

Members of Heaven's Gate were engaged in the most trite of all American religious pursuits: the attempt to get into heaven by means of doing what they thought the Bible called them to do. Like many other American Christians, they believed that the millennial timetable was soon approaching. They believed in the rapture of the faithful, wherein the true believers would be saved from the tribulations that are to come on Earth. They believed in immortal souls, in trying to overcome human temptations, and in a heavenly reward. They thought that their interpretation of the Bible was the correct one, and they were eager to engage in conversation about that. Hold Heaven's Gate up to a mirror and you see American Protestant Christianity, which collectively is the largest religious tradition in the nation.

WRSP: Who were Marshall Herff Applewhite and Bonnie Lu Nettles? What was it about their lives that led them to becoming the leaders of what Paul Brian Thomas calls an "ET-inspired religion" whose members would ultimately decide to exit Earth by killing their human bodies?

Zeller: In some way what makes this story so remarkable is that they were so ordinary. Applewhite (known as Do or Bo within the movement) was a music teacher, the son of Presbyterian minister, and a closeted bisexual living in 1970s Texas when he met Nettles. Nettles (known as Ti or Peep) was a nurse, a lapsed Baptist, and a soon-to-be divorcée. Both were spiritual seekers. Nettles practiced astrology and channeling, the latter a practice of communicating with disembodied or remote beings, usually spirits of the dead in Nettles's case. Applewhite had been having strange mystical experiences that he found difficult to describe. When they met both of them had also just undergone painful experiences of ending relationships, and Applewhite had the additional burden of trying to come to grips with his sexuality.

So, several factors led to Heaven's Gate. First, both were spiritual seekers who already had backgrounds in different religious quests. Second, both wanted to respond to broken relationships and find some way to move beyond those. Third, both were at points of transition in their lives. The religious positions of Heaven's Gate all reflected these important parts of the founders' experiences, especially the rejection of sexuality and the body. But I think it is important not to *reduce* the formation of Heaven's Gate to these factors. It helps illuminate why they were open to and able to form a new religious movement, but it does not explain why they actually created the group. (Lots of people have similar experiences; almost none of them found new religions!)

WRSP: What can be learned from the study of Heaven's Gate about the social construction of charisma (belief that someone has access to an unseen source of authority)?

Zeller: That it is socially constructed, of course! British sociologist Roy Wallis wrote a great article back in 1984 called “The Social Construction of Charisma” wherein he noted, “Charisma is essentially a relationship born out of interaction between a leader and his followers.” I completely agree. The best way to demonstrate this is to watch the videos of Applewhite (sadly, there are none of Nettles). When you do so, ask yourself where the charisma is. It certainly is not innate. I often show these videos in my classes and most students find Applewhite un-enthraling and his message implausible. Yet ex-members whom I interviewed and who have been quoted in other studies or the media often remark on Applewhite’s charisma and magnetic personality. One of the group’s first ex-members, who briefly joined then left in the 1970s, referred to Applewhite and Nettles as possessing hypnotic abilities.

That idea of hypnotism is important, not because I think either Nettles or Applewhite had such abilities, but because it shows how members understood their processes of conversion and de-conversion, and the leadership of the group. At their times of entrance into the community, most members already upheld ideas about certain people having special religious powers. Besides hypnotism, people talked about leaders having special vibrations, or having been fated in certain ways, or being visitors from another planet or dimension, or other concepts that showed that adherents looked for and wanted to find charisma in Nettles and Applewhite. So they did. Even those who left often retained this idea that the founders of Heaven’s Gate were somehow special.

WRSP: Why did people join Heaven’s Gate? Why did they find the teachings of Applewhite and Nettles to be plausible?

Zeller: Like all religious communities, people joined for a variety of reasons. Some joined because a friend or family member did, and others because they were looking for something new or different. But most joined because they found the teachings of Heaven’s Gate not only plausible but *more* plausible than other religious or scientific explanations for the world around them. They were looking for meaningful answers to their questions, and Heaven’s Gate offered that. For most of the people who would become adherents, the main attraction was that Heaven’s Gate offered what they considered realistic and rational explanations to the big religious questions. The worldview of the movement did not appeal to miracles, magic, supernatural beings, or even God in the traditional understanding. It rooted all its answers in the idea of physical, biological, beings from outer space who interacted with humankind. It was a religious expansion of Erich von Däniken’s ancient astronaut idea, namely that advanced extraterrestrials were mistaken for gods in ancient times. Their model of salvation was also non-supernaturalist, as members believed (at first) that they would biologically and chemically transform their bodies into new extraterrestrial ones, and then (later) that they would upload their consciousnesses to new bodies the same way that one transfers programs between computers. Adherents found this more plausible than claims about deities, souls, karma, spirits, and other sorts of supernaturalistic explanations.

Applewhite and Nettles were also very careful to root their teachings in what they saw as plausible interpretations of the Bible. To take one example, their vision of the arrival of the extraterrestrials was basically an interpretation of the same New Testament passage (1 Thessalonians 4:17) that many Evangelical Christians see as promising a “rapture of the faithful” wherein the select few will meet Christ midair and then journey to heaven. The thing is, both are just interpretations, and the text is unclear. Applewhite and Nettles insisted—and members agreed—that their interpretation was best. Really it just depends on the assumptions one begins with. Few people shared the assumptions of Applewhite, Nettles, and members of Heaven’s Gate, but that doesn’t mean that their ideas were implausible to

them. (If you are interested in this topic, I suggest the article I wrote called “Extraterrestrial Biblical Hermeneutics and the Making of Heaven’s Gate,” in *Nova Religio* 14, no. 2 [November 2010]: 34-60, as well as Eugene V. Gallagher’s article on biblical interpretation in the Raelian movement, also in *Nova Religio* 14, no. 2, “Extraterrestrial Exegesis: The Raëlian Movement as a Biblical Religion,” 14-33.)

WRSP: What was the understanding of salvation that Applewhite and Nettles taught to their students? In other words, what was the religious goal they were trying to achieve?

Zeller: It is important to realize that the goal shifted over time, that Heaven’s Gate changed, just as other religions do. Most old religions change slowly. To take what is now regarded as mainstream Western Christianity’s teachings about life after death as an example, different Christians have believed over the past two thousand years in heaven and hell, purgatory, limbo, resurrection of the flesh, spiritual rebirth, and sometimes various combinations. Heaven’s Gate adherents had two basic teaching about salvation.

At first Ti and Do taught that a UFO would literally descend into the Earth’s atmosphere and in a technological reenactment of the rapture of the church—a reference to a specific Protestant millennial belief—would pick up the select few by use of a tractor beam and bring them on board. The UFO would then sail into outer space, or the Next Level. Adherents would metamorph into new perfected extraterrestrial bodies and would live eternally in a sort of angelic existence, helping to manage the universe and the life it contains.

By the end of the group’s existence, Do taught that adherents would need to leave their human bodies behind, and that their consciousnesses would be uploaded into new extraterrestrial bodies made ready for them in a UFO that remained in the Next Level. Adherents would then assume the same sort of angelic existence.

In both cases, the goal was to join the Next Level crew, to become immortal perfected beings that neither ate nor slept, procreated nor died. They would exist as a single-minded crew and do the work of the Next Level in managing the many worlds of the cosmos. Some members compared this to *Star Trek’s* vision of a unified crew aboard a spaceship that protects and serves for the good of the universe. Others compared it to the angelic hierarchy portrayed in biblical sources. It was all about transcending the human condition.

WRSP: What were the practices of the members of Ti and Do’s “class” in order to overcome their human nature? Why would they engage in these practices?

Zeller: Good questions. Since they wanted to transcend the human condition eventually, they believed they had to start that here on Earth. They tried to break all their human connections: to family, friends, colleagues at work, schoolmates, etc. Their only relationships were with their teachers and fellow members of their movement, which they referred to as the Class. They seldom communicated with their birth families. They worked jobs only to make enough money to live, not as a vocation or calling. They generally avoided friendships outside of the group.

Since Next Level extraterrestrials were genderless, they tried to dress and live genderlessly. That meant celibacy, and in a few cases male individuals choosing to “neuter” themselves, to use their term

for surgical castration. Next Level extraterrestrials also did not eat, so Heaven's Gate members looked at food and eating as merely practical and avoided eating for pleasure.

Finally, they saw themselves as part of a crew. They wore uniforms, and dedicated themselves to working and living as a crew. That meant living together in a house that they referred to as a "craft," sharing tasks together, and seeking to make the good of the group more important than their own.

WRSP: Were members of the group free to leave or were they prevented from leaving if they wanted to?

Zeller: They were free to leave, and many did. Heaven's Gate had hundreds of people at its height in the late 1970s. It slowly shrank over the years. Most left on their own, but also Applewhite and Nettles asked members who could not follow the group's practices to leave. When Applewhite first brought up suicide, one or two members left. Another member left just a few months before the suicides.

So they were free to leave, but we shouldn't minimize how for those who truly believed in the Heaven's Gate message, it would have been difficult to imagine turning your back on what they believed was their only chance to evolve beyond the human condition. Many members also had strong personal and social bonds with their coreligionists. Ex-members have told me how hard it was to leave because they really cared about the group and its members. Again, Heaven's Gate is not that different than most other religions in that way. How many people still affiliate with a house of worship or religious institution because they like the people or just find it hard to leave, even though they no longer believe or necessarily even want to stay?

WRSP: Why did 38 people decide to join Do in committing suicide in 1997?

Zeller: For members of Heaven's Gate, it wasn't really a suicide. That's the most important thing to realize. For them, it was suicide to *not* lay down their bodies. It was suicide to *not* leave an Earth that they thought was destined for destruction. From their perspective, it is really all of *us* who have actually committed suicide by not joining them. This is why they called the suicides "exits" rather than suicides. They thought of themselves as simply leaving their bodies behind, as passengers leave behind a car or train upon arriving at their destination.

A lot of ink has been spilled over why the members chose to commit suicide in March 1997, as opposed to some other date. We will never actually know for sure. There was a confluence of factors at that time that led Applewhite and the adherents of the movement to consider suicide to be possible. The most important was that they thought that the whole world was watching the heavens, specifically the Hale-Bopp comet, with rumors of a UFO trailing it. From very early on the group thought of themselves as offering a demonstration of Next Level teachings. This was a chance to demonstrate to the world that people had to leave it behind. It was also Easter time. In the very first days of the movement, Applewhite and Nettles talked about members' transformations from humans to Next Level beings as "their Easters." Now it really was Easter, the comet was overhead, some flying saucer watchers thought that a UFO was trailing it, and everything seemed to be coming together. Finally, the group was getting older. Applewhite and the members wanted to leave as a group, not see each other slowly die off. This was a *communal* group.

WRSP: Please comment further on how their “exit,” to use their terminology, related to their religious worldview? Was it related to an apocalyptic or millennial perspective?

Zeller: It was millennial. They never set a precise timetable for the end, but they expected it imminently. The metaphor they used was “spading under.” Earth was a garden, and they believed the weeds had taken it over. The present civilization had to be removed so that a new one could be planted. They did believe in reincarnation, and they believed that some of the people living today would have future opportunities to join the Next Level in a future incarnation, but overall they had a grim vision of the imminent future of the planet.

From the very early days of the movement, Applewhite and Nettles had studied the New Testament book of Revelation and sought to unravel its mysteries. I have a copy of the Bible that they used, and interestingly, they took more notes on the Gospel of Luke than they did on Revelation, so they were not an exclusively millennial group. They really wanted to understand and rework Christian theology in light of what they truly believed were extraterrestrial visitations. But they did come to believe in a form of Christian millennialism called premillennial Dispensationalism. This is a system popularized by Protestant theologian C. I. Scofield (1843-1921). Scofield’s basic approach was to envision a series of “dispensations” or eras during which God interacted with human beings differently. The current dispensation would end in the “rapture of the faithful” wherein the true believers would physically rise up, meet Christ midair, and go to heaven while the rest of humanity faced years of tribulations and tragedy in preparation for its final millennial fate. During the years that Heaven’s Gate was forming, Dispensationalism was increasingly widespread among conservative Christians, and Texas minister Hal Lindsey (b. 1929) had popularized it with his *Late, Great Planet Earth* (1970), which applied Dispensationalist interpretations to contemporary world affairs and current events. (More recently, the *Left Behind* series [1995-2007] by Tim LaHaye [b. 1926] and Jerry B. Jenkins [b. 1949] offers a fictional version of the same theological perspective.)

Nettles and Applewhite adopted Dispensationalism and reread it in light of their beliefs in UFOs and extraterrestrial visitation. They believed that Christ was a Next Level extraterrestrial, and that the mid-air rendezvous would be aboard a UFO. They hoped for rapture, in other words, but a ufological version of it. Over the group’s twenty-year period they moved away from Dispensationalism towards a more eclectic form of catastrophic millennialism, but they continued to believe in the imminent end of the world as we know it, and the need to leave the planet to avoid that.

WRSP: Do you think the 38 who followed Do in what those of us on the outside of the group consider to be death was the result of brainwashing?

Zeller: Brainwashing is a helpful rhetorical tool to distinguish beliefs with which we are not comfortable from those with which we are comfortable. Do I believe that members lived within a closed and relatively insulated communalist group wherein leaders and fellow members encouraged obedience? Yes, that was the case. Do I believe that there was a “group think” in Heaven’s Gate, and that members looked to Applewhite as the source of absolute authority within the group? Yes, that was also the case. However, do I believe that members had choices? Yes, I do. We know that individuals chose to leave the group, including in the final months before the suicides. In their writings and videos, individuals expressed differing perspectives on theology, practice, and relations with outsiders. In the “exit videos,”

nearly every member looked at the camera and declared that they had freely chosen to lay down their earthly lives.

Do we dismiss this evidence of choice as only an illusion of free will? We can, but then I am not sure why we should accept anyone's claim of free will. We are all conditioned by family, culture, and society. Members of Heaven's Gate allowed themselves to be conditioned in a different way, but that does not make them any more or less brainwashed than everyone else. We can call adherents brainwashed if it makes us feel better, but this is an entirely subjective rhetorical label, and has no empirical basis.

WRSP: Are there members of the Class who did not exit with Do? What have they done subsequently? Are they still committed believers?

Zeller: There are hundreds of ex-members, but only a half-dozen or so are active in terms of identifying as ex-members of the Class. The two individuals who run the heavensgate.com website are still committed to the memory of the group, but they are firm in their belief that the Class is over and the movement is defunct. Ex-member Rio Di Angelo has written a spiritual autobiography about his time in the group, but he has tried to close that chapter of his life. A few other ex-members are active online, posting blogs or videos about Heaven's Gate, but all agree that the group is no longer in existence. Adherents of Heaven's Gate all believed that Ti and Do (Nettles and Applewhite) were their channels to the Next Level, and with both of them gone there could be no earthly Class anymore. Some ex-members remain committed to the memory of the group, others remain true believers, and most have preferred to remain anonymous and keep their thoughts private. I've respected that by not "outing" ex-members.

WRSP: How is Heaven's Gate similar to or different from other religious communities that either committed group suicide or may have committed group suicide? What can be learned from making comparisons?

Zeller: Heaven's Gate ended on its own terms. Its members' home was not invaded, there was no government raid, and no imminent doom facing the group. Nor is there any evidence that the suicides were coerced or actually homicides. This marks Heaven's Gate as distinct from other cases of religious group suicide, the most common examples being the members of Peoples Temple at Jonestown, the Solar Temple, and the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God. (Some people would include the Branch Davidians too, but that case is rather complicated.)

Honestly, there is no pattern among such groups. I'll return to the idea of science, which is how this conversation began. No scientist would base a theory or model on four or five cases. No social scientist would interview four or five people and proclaim to have found a representative sample. There is nothing we can really say about religious group suicide as a phenomenon given how few cases we have seen, and how different each case is. I am left with the need to turn away from science and science's goals of discovering laws, theories, and patterns and look instead towards the humanistic goal of understanding through contextualization and analysis. The only way to understand why members of Heaven's Gate committed suicide is to study Heaven's Gate carefully within its historical, social, and cultural context. That is what I have tried to do.

Dr. Zeller, thank you for participating in the WRSP Forum!

Benjamin E. Zeller earned a M.T.S. at Harvard Divinity School in 2002 and his Ph.D. in religious studies at University of North Carolina in 2007. From 2007 to 2012 he was assistant professor at Brevard College, where he was coordinator of the religious studies program from 2009 to 2012, and director of the Honors Program from 2010 to 2012. He was a Fulbright scholar at Åbo Akademi University, Turku, Finland in Fall 2012. He became assistant professor of religion at Lake Forest College in 2013. He is author of *Prophets and Protons: New Religious Movements and Science in Late Twentieth-Century America* (2010); and *Heaven's Gate: America's UFO Religion* (2014). He is co-editor with Marie W. Dallam, Reid L. Neilson, and Nora L. Rubel of *Religion, Food, and Eating in North America* (2014); and co-editor with George D. Chryssides of *The Bloomsbury Companion to New Religious Movements* (2014). He is author of numerous book chapters and journal articles. He has served as co-general editor of *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* since 2012. He guest-edited *Nova Religio* 14, no. 4 (May 2011), a special issue on "New Religious Movements and Science." His research and teaching focus on religious currents that are new or alternative, including new religions, the religious engagement with science, and the quasi-religious relationship people have with food.

WRSP Interviewer:

Dr. Catherine Wessinger