

## **Heaven's Gate: End-time prophets in a post-modern era.**

by George D. Chryssides

### *Abstract*

The article addresses the question of how the leader of the Heaven's Gate group, Marshall Herff Applewhite, was able to persuade his followers of his distinctive interpretation of the Book of Revelation, and hence to commit communal suicide to gain entry to the 'Next Level above Human'. The author considers mainstream scholarly commentary on Revelation, and contrasts this with Applewhite's exegesis, arguing that, although the Heaven's Gate leader had training in philosophy and theology, he nonetheless devised his own distinctive idiosyncratic interpretation. It is argued that the Heaven's Gate group manifested James Beckford's four key features of postmodernity: (1) non-rational, devoid of systematic exposition; (2) eclectic, combining science fiction and horticultural metaphors with biblical teaching; (3) spontaneous and frivolous, with unpredictable behaviour on the part of the founder-leaders; and (4) the absence of triumphalist, over-arching myths. Being uninterested in systematic, diachronic interpretation of John's Revelation, the meaning of the text for the group derived from its use, in line with Wittgenstein's theory of meaning. The author argues, in conclusion, that a community's invention of a new meaning for a religious text is nothing new, one important precedent being the early Christian use of Jewish scripture.

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And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they shall prophesy ... clothed in sackcloth ... And when they have finished their testimony, the beast that ascendeth out of the bottomless pit shall make war against them and shall overcome them and kill them. And their dead bodies shall lie in the street of the great city. ... And the people ... shall see their dead bodies three days and an half. ... And after three days and an half the spirit of life from God entered them and they stood upon their feet and great fear fell upon them which saw them. And they heard a great voice from heaven saying unto them, Come up hither. And they ascended up to heaven in a cloud; and their enemies beheld them. And the same hour there was a great earthquake, and the tenth part of the city fell ... and the remnant were affrighted and gave glory to the God in heaven. (Revelation: 11:3-13)

The enigmatic nature of the Book of Revelation has enabled a variety of improbable interpretations. Most people, and certainly all serious academic interpreters of the book, would agree that St John the Divine was not talking about spaceships, the Hale-Bopp comet, the Heaven's Gate leaders Marshall Applewhite and Bonnie Nettles, and how to gain transition from the realm of human existence to 'the next level above human'. Why, then, should an iconoclastic interpretation of the book by two leaders, both devoid of any formal qualifications that enabled them to pronounce authoritatively on its meaning, not only gain credence by their followers, but persuade them to commit collective suicide, in the certainty that this interpretation was true.

Mass suicide can be difficult to comprehend, particularly in a group like Heaven's Gate, which was under no immediate threat, unlike the Peoples Temple or the Cult Davidians at Waco. Those of us who are in positions of authority know only too well how difficult it can be to secure compliance, even on small matters; how, then, could Applewhite apparently gain such a hold over his followers to make such a supreme sacrifice? This essay explores the question by considering the worldview of Heaven's Gate, and how Applewhite's interpretation, strange as it might seem to those outside the organization, succeeded in gaining credence.

In what follows I do not intend to take up issues such as brainwashing or charismatic leadership. While acknowledging that many religious groups exercise psychological pressure on their members, 'brainwashing' is an imprecise and emotive term, lacking clear or agreed definition, and brainwashing theories were largely discredited in Eileen Barker's important study *The Making of a Moonie*. Robert Balch, who covertly joined Heaven's Gate in 1975, together with his collaborator David Taylor, concluded that seekers were more inclined to come into the movement through a process of 'social drift', while retention within the movement was a result of 'social influence'. (Balch, 1995). Likewise, charismatic leadership is a problematic concept. I have elsewhere argued that there are importantly different types of charismatic leader, and that charisma is better regarded not an inherent quality of a leader, but as something that is generated by a group as much as by the supposedly charismatic leader. (Chryssides, 2001). I know of no one, apart from the members of Heaven's Gate, who regarded Applewhite as remotely

charismatic and the members of the fated community were not impressionable young people: in fact only two members were in their twenties and the average age was 47.

If we want to understand Heaven's Gate, we must examine the group's worldview, and I shall do this by arguing that the group exhibited a number of features associated with post-modernity. Post-modernity, of course, differs from post-modernism, the former being the set of characteristics that are supposedly attributable to humanity's present condition, while the latter consists of the ideas of various thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida and Jean François Lyotard. The present study will therefore draw on the features of post-modernity, rather than endorse the ideas of any of the post-modernist writers.

Regarding methodology, I intend to outline the key ideas from the Bible, principally — but not exclusively — the Book of Revelation, on which the group drew. I shall sketch out some of the issues arising from these passages that would typically elicit comment by present-day biblical scholars, contrasting these with Applewhite's interpretation. The Heaven's Gate group is, of course, no longer in existence to corroborate or comment on interpretations: the one survivor, Chuck Humphrey (known as Rkkody, pronounced 'Ricody') committed suicide a year later, in an attempt to join the rest of the 'crew'. Sources that remain are twofold: the Heaven's Gate web site, which has been mirrored and is still accessible on the Internet, and some early accounts of the organization in the 1970s, written by Balch and Taylor.

(1) *The history of Heaven's Gate*

A brief outline of the history of Heaven's Gate, leading up to the tragic events of 1997, may be useful at this juncture. The organization was founded by Marshall Herff Applewhite (1931-1997) and Bonnie Nettles (1927-1985). Applewhite was the son of a Presbyterian minister, and decided to study philosophy, gaining his degree in 1952. Intending to follow in his father's footsteps, he embarked on a theology course in Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education, at Richmond, Virginia. He soon abandoned his studies, deciding to embark on a musical career, and completed a Master's degree in Music at the University of Colorado. He held two university posts: first at the University of Alabama, and subsequently at St Thomas' University, Houston, from which he was dismissed in 1970. Applewhite had experienced problems regarding his sexual orientation: he was married, but had a number of homosexual affairs. In 1965 he left his wife, and the couple were divorced in 1968. His father's death in 1971 compounded Applewhite's emotional problems, and it was in a state of confusion and depression that he met Bonnie Nettles in 1972.

Nettles was born a Baptist, but was little interested in mainstream Christianity. A member of the Houston Theosophical Society, she believed in the existence of the Masters, and attended a meditation group which claimed to channel discarnate spirits. The circumstances of her meeting Applewhite are unclear. According to most accounts, Nettles was a pediatric nurse, who was filling in at a hospital, where Applewhite was seeking a 'cure' for his homosexuality. Other accounts state that Applewhite had a heart condition, and had a Near Death Experience (NDE) in the course of his treatment. One

source suggests he was simply a visitor to the hospital, while another suggests that he suffered the more mundane ailment of haemorrhoids.

I do not propose to adjudicate on these competing explanations for the meeting. Whatever happened, Applewhite and Nettles established a rapport. Both had recently experienced personal traumas, and regarded their meeting as divinely ordained. Their subsequent relationship was not a sexual one: they believed that it was somehow connected with fulfilling biblical prophecy, and providing some new understanding of the world and human destiny. They came to attribute their personal traumas to the possession of their bodies by 'Next Level' minds.

After spending some six weeks at a Texas ranch, the two decided to take their message 'on the road'. After a brief encounter with Ananda Marga, which did not appeal to them, they reached the conclusion that they were the 'two witnesses' mentioned in the Book of Revelation (Revelation 11:1-2), and announced their identity on 11 August 1973. They hired a car, and travelled through Canada, buying their necessities with a credit card, which Nettles had 'borrowed'. Their technique of propagating their message appears largely to have consisted of leaving notes in churches announcing that the 'two witnesses' had arrived. At one point, the Two alighted on a New Age centre, only to discover two members of the community already claiming to be the 'the Two'. When Applewhite failed to return the hire car, and the police discovered Nettles' credit card fraud, the two were arrested, and served prison sentences. It was during his six-month period in prison that Applewhite appeared to shape his theology. From this point

onwards, there was little reference to the occult, but more on UFOs and the Next Level Above Human. Applewhite taught that there would soon be a ‘demonstration’ — empirical proof of the existence of extra-terrestrials, who would arrive to collect their crew.

Having been released from prison, the Two met up again, and, having convinced themselves that their mission was somehow connected with extra-terrestrials and space travel, they attempted to select a ‘crew’. This time, they decided to organize a series of public meetings, producing advertisement, the first of which read as follows:

## UFO’S

Why they are here.

Who they have come for.

When they will leave.

NOT a discussion of UFO sightings or phenomena

Two individuals say they were sent from the level above human, and are about to leave the human level and literally (physically) return to that next evolutionary level in a spacecraft (UFO) within months! “The Two” will

discuss how the transition from the human level to the next level is accomplished, and when this may be done.

This is not a religious or philosophical organization recruiting membership. However, the information has already prompted many individuals to devote their total energy to the transitional process. If you have ever entertained the idea that there may be a real, PHYSICAL level beyond the Earth's confines, you will want to attend this meeting. (Cited in Chryssides, 1999, p.69.)

The group assumed various names. Applewhite called it the 'Anonymous Sexaholics Celibate Church', but perhaps unsurprisingly this name was dropped after a very short period. The press gave it the name 'Human Individual Metamorphosis' (HIM), which was Applewhite's jargon for the evolutionary process which their crew were expected to undergo in order to arrive at the Next Level. 'The Two' initially assumed the names of 'Guinea' and 'Pig' — an allusion to their belief that they were participants in a cosmic experiment, designed by the inhabitants of the Next Level. The Two invariably abandoned conventional human names, in order to emphasize their 'Next Level' identity, and being 'The Two' their names — which changed through time — were invariably those of matching pairs, such as Bo and Peep, Do and Ti (or Te), and even Nincom and Poop.

Nettles and Applewhite organized a total of 130 such meetings in various locations in the U.S.A. and Canada. At one meeting — at Waldport, near Eugene, Oregon in September 1975 — 200 people turned up to hear Bo and Peep, and 33 joined, giving up their attachments to the human world. At its height some 200 followers accepted The Two's message.

In 1975, however, Applewhite and Nettles split the group up into small cells, assigning each member a partner, and sending them to various locations throughout the U.S.A., while Applewhite and Nettles withdrew from public view. It was during this period that the really stringent membership requirements were imposed. Members were not allowed contact with family or friends; reading newspapers and watching television were forbidden; members had to renounce drugs and alcohol; men had to shave off their beards and women had to give up wearing jewellery; sex was prohibited; and friendships and conventional forms of socializing were to be given up. Members were required to assume new names, all of which had to end in '-ody'. This austere period, which lasted until February 1976, resulted in mass apostasy, and the organization lost approximately half its members.

In February 1976, Applewhite and Nettles reappeared, now known as Ti and Do, and that summer the group moved to a remote camp near Laramie, Wyoming. Nettles at first informed the group that they would receive a 'demonstration' of the events The Two had predicted — by which she meant a firm sighting of a spacecraft — but the group was later told that this 'demonstration' was cancelled. (Nettles seems to have made a practice

of tantalizing the group with such prospects, which did not materialize.) The group was then divided into small units, or 'star clusters' each named after a stellar constellation. It was at this time that 'uniforms' began to be worn, consisting of a nylon anorak and hood, making members appear rather like Christian monks. In 1978 the group's finances took a dramatic turn for the better. The exact details are unclear. An ex-member informant of Balch's mentioned a legacy of \$300,000 that the leaders inherited; John R. Hall, on the other hand, attributes the group's financial success to external jobs that were taken up by members, principally in auto repairs, technical writing and computing. (It is an agreed fact that members had been undertaking external work immediately before the communal suicide; some of the group had expertise in web design.)

The progress of the Heaven's Gate group from 1979 onwards is not so well documented. Balch and Taylor left the group in 1975, and Balch stopped collecting information in the early 1980s. However, we know of two events which were of key significance. Nettles was diagnosed as having cancer in the early 1980s, and in 1983 had to undergo surgery, in which one of her eyes was removed. She died in 1985. Applewhite's interpretation of this event was that she had abandoned her earthly body in order to return to the Next Level to await the rest of the group. Applewhite remained to lead the group single-handed.

The second event of import was in 1992, when the group resurfaced publicly, this time with the name 'Total Overcomers Anonymous'. Despite their previous claim that the

crew was complete, they made a ‘final offer’ the following year, putting out a satellite broadcast, and taking out a full-page advertisement in *USA Today*, part of which read:

The Earth’s present ‘civilization’ is about to be recycled — ‘spaded under.’ Its inhabitants are refusing to evolve. The ‘weeds’ have taken over the garden and disturbed its usefulness beyond repair. (*USA Today*, 27 May 1993; quoted in Balch, 1995, p.163.)

This final call was essentially for the ‘lost sheep’ to re-establish contact with the group. About twenty of them did, and were re-admitted.

This final period of the group’s life was characterized by renewed vigour. There were renewed attempts to curb sensual desire, and when some male members found this unduly difficult, they discussed the possibility of castration. Seven members and Applewhite himself underwent surgery. The group continued to proclaim that the Earth was about to be ‘spaded under’, and that humanity had a ‘last chance to advance beyond human’, but this time with a much great urgency than ever before. Balch comments that one of their advertisements ‘had an apocalyptic tone that was much more dramatic than anything I had heard in 1975.’ (Balch, 1995, p.163; cited in Hall, 2000, p.170).

The final incidents are well known. Applewhite and his followers rented Rancho Santa Fe, a mansion situated some thirty miles to the north of San Diego. Members of the group continued with their computer consultancy work, under the name ‘Higher Source’, and

led a highly regimented quasi-monastic life. Reports about the Hale-Bopp Comet began in November 1996, and rumours of another object behind it were propagated by Courtney Brown, a university professor who had written a book *Cosmic Voyage*. Brown claimed to have communicated with psychics who affirmed that this object was a large alien spacecraft. Brown averred that it was arriving, not for the purpose of invading Earth, but to facilitate 'galactic evolution'. Members of Heaven's Gate took a keen interest, studying the skies and listening to reports of the comet's progress.

The third week in March was Holy Week in the Christian calendar, and the group requested that there should be no visitors. The week was spent recording farewell videos and preparing for the transition. They packed suitcases, put money and identification in their pockets, and committed suicide, as planned.

### *The Book of Revelation*

The Book of Revelation, as well as a few other biblical passages, featured significantly in Applewhite's teachings. Although seemingly 'scientific', UFO-religions are remarkably biblical in their teachings. Some, like Unarius (the first UFO-religion to gain attention, founded in 1954 by Ernest L. Norman) and the Aetherius Society (founded by George King in 1955) place biblical teachings in a wider world-ecumenical religious context, as did Erich von Däniken, in his well-known and influential *Chariots of the Gods?* (1969). Others have focused more exclusively on the Bible, for example the Raëlian Movement

(founded by Claude Vorilhon in 1974) and Heaven's Gate. In what follows, I propose to examine the interpretations of the 'Two Witnesses' passage in Revelation that are generally found in mainstream Christian academic writing, and then to compare them with the meanings which members of Heaven's Gate ascribed to it.

Unsurprisingly, there are significant differences in mainstream scholarly interpretations of the Revelation passage. The book's historical context, and hence its dating, are contested, some scholars favouring a date around 68 C.E., when the Roman Emperor Nero was persecuting the Jewish and Christian communities, while others favour the later date, between 92 and 96 C.E., during Domitian's rule. Although much used by fundamentalist Christian apocalyptists, it is not at all certain that the bulk of the text was written with a Christian readership in mind. It may have been originally a Jewish and not a Christian apocalyptic work, lightly edited, with the insertion of a few specifically Christian interpolations. One example is found in the passage under discussion (Revelation 11:8), in which the clause 'where also their Lord was crucified' follows the phrase 'the great city' (the passage is omitted from the opening quotation here): this could easily be a Christian insertion into a text that reads very adequately without the expression. The central spiritual figure in the book is 'the Lamb', whom Christians popularly assume to be Jesus. However, this is never explicitly stated, and there only one identification of Jesus as 'the lamb of God' by John (almost certainly not the same author as that of Revelation) in his gospel: 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!' (John 1:29).

Although the author makes it sound like a personal vision in which John gains access to heaven and sees God's throne, this is more likely a literary device, serving as a framework for the book's message. Revelation is certainly a composite work, not something revealed in one single moment, when the author was 'in the Spirit on the Lord's Day' (Revelation 1:10), since much of it is drawn — not to say plagiarized — from Hebrew scripture and Jewish apocalyptic writings of the inter-testamental period. Indeed the composite nature of the work may well be the cause of apparent discrepancies relating to dating.

The passage under discussion it is situated in the centre of the book, and is a pivotal chapter. The main substance of the book up to this point has been a vision given to John of a door opening up into heaven, through which he was taken, and afforded a view of God's throne. He sees a scroll, which has seven seals firmly protecting it. The 'Lamb' sits on God's right hand: he is unusual in having seven horns and seven eyes, and he looked 'as if he had been slain' (Revelation 5:4). The ensuing chapters describe the progressing opening of the seals, and this is followed by seven angels successively blasting their trumpets. By the end of the ninth chapter, the seventh angel is expected, but the text breaks off with a parenthetical chapter and a half (Revelation 10:1-11:14). Although it is probably an interpolation, it serves to increase the suspense before the seventh trumpet and the final opening of the scroll.

In this hiatus, a 'mighty angel', who has a face like the sun, and legs like fiery pillars, presents John with a 'little scroll'. John is asked to eat the scroll: this seemingly strange

injunction is reminiscent of the prophet Ezekiel, who was given a similar command (Ezekiel 2:9-3:3). The importance of this seemingly strange instruction is that it heralds a prophetic message, which the prophet has quite literally had to ‘read, mark, learn and inwardly digest’. John is then asked to measure God’s temple and altar: again, this harks back to Ezekiel, who has a vision of ‘a man whose appearance was like bronze’ measuring the Temple area (Ezekiel 40). John is instructed not to measure the Court of the Gentiles, since they are excluded from God’s dwelling: we are to understand that they are either the Roman persecutors, or else the heretics that John has condemned earlier in this writing (Revelation 2:6, 14). The New Jerusalem will be designed without a Gentile court, thus ensuring their exclusion.

‘Two witnesses’ will prophesy, reminding their hearers of the impending doom. The identity of ‘the two’ is crucial for understanding the passage (and of course Heaven’s Gate). Two witnesses were needed in order to accord with Jewish law, which required at least two witnesses in order to convict someone of a crime (Deuteronomy 19:15). This passage predicts either judgement on Rome for its persecution, or on the Jews for their disobedience. The vast majority of commentators agree that the ‘two witnesses’ are Moses and Elijah, being the personification of the Law and the Prophets respectively. At the scene of Jesus’ transfiguration (Mark 9: 2-13), Moses and Elijah appear as witnesses to attest God’s designation of Jesus as his Son. Both confronted the Israelites’ idolatry, as evidenced by Moses’ anger at the golden calf incident (Exodus 32) and Elijah’s admonition of Queen Jezebel (1 Kings 21:23-24). The reference to fire coming from their mouths to devour enemies is more obscure: the allusion may be to Elijah’s miraculous

kindling of fire on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:16-39), although it is more difficult to find an incident relating to Moses. Some commentators suggest the allusion metaphorically relates to the plagues of Egypt, but it may refer to Moses' fiery serpent (Numbers 21:8).

The numerology in the chapter is not easy to decode. The passage refers to 42 months (11:2), 1,260 days (11:3) three and a half days (11:9,11) and seven thousand people who are killed in the ensuing earthquake. The first three numbers are inherently connected: 42 months and 1,260 days both being three and a half years. Whatever the explanation, the numbers are derived from Daniel 12:7, an equally obscure passage in which Daniel asks the question, 'How long will it be before these astonishing things are fulfilled?' and is told by 'a man clothed in linen', 'It will be for a time, times and half a time.' (Daniel 12:6) As Preston and Hanson point out, the significance of three and half may derive from its being half of the perfect number (seven), and hence appropriate to designate a period of duration of evil power. Certainly, both Daniel and John are speaking of a period of tribulation — John in fact calls it the 'Great Tribulation' (Revelation 7:14) — and Daniel is probably alluding to the persecution of the Jews under Antiochus some two centuries previously. The period designated by the number 'three and half' is, however, a period in which good will triumph over evil, and John speaks of the resurrection of the two witnesses, and their ascension into heaven, having been taken up into a cloud (Revelation 11:12) at the final end, followed by the ascent of God's chosen ones, leaving the rest of humanity behind amidst total chaos and disaster.

### *Heaven's Gate's exegesis*

Scholarly interpretation of Revelation did not interest Nettles and Applewhite or their followers. Applewhite's message lacked any formal theological vocabulary: the metaphors he used were of two main types. The first type are essentially derived from science fiction, especially TV series and films such as Star Trek, Star Wars, and E.T. Applewhite frequently refers to an 'away team' — a concept used by the crew of the Star Ship Enterprise in Star Trek to refer to those who had temporarily left their spaceship to embark on a special mission. Applewhite used this term to refer to the space aliens who have left their home planet, and who were engaged in the mission of 'tagging' designated individuals, with a view to enabling the transition from Earth to the Next Level Above Human.

The second type of metaphor that Applewhite employed was horticultural. He spoke of the Earth as a 'garden' which was now so smothered with weeds that it had to be 'spaded under'. In order to be transported to the Next Level, 'grafting' was needed: the members of Heaven's Gate had to be 'grafted' on to the two leaders, Nettles and Applewhite. Horticultural metaphors derive principally from the Bible, where Jesus speaks of himself as the 'real vine' whose gardener was his father, and whose branches were his disciples, deriving their power from Christ, the principal stem (John 15:1). Engrafting is a metaphor used by Paul, to indicate how the Gentiles can become part of God's covenant, which was originally given to the Jews (Romans 11:11-24). Parables of sowing seed, harvesting crops, uprooting weeds, and working in vineyards feature prominently in Jesus' teaching.

Some commentators have suggested that Applewhite used other sources, notably Hinduism and ‘Gnosticism’. Writing on behalf of the Dialog Center, Helle Meldgaard states, ‘The mythology of “Heaven’s Gate” has echoes of both classical Hinduism, Christian ideas, and not least clear Gnostic traits.’ (Meldgaard, 2003). It is unlikely that either of ‘The Two’ read any Hindu texts, and the suggestion of a Hindu connection has angered several Hindu teachers (Brahmavidyananda, 1997; Atmarupananda, 2003). Catherine Wessinger suggests that their idea that the body was a suit of clothes, which the soul casts off upon death, comes from the Bhagavad-Gita, possibly through Helena P. Blavatsky’s *The Secret Doctrine*. Even this is doubtful: the idea of the body as the suit of clothes is to be found in Plato’s *Phaedo*, which Applewhite would be likely to have encountered as a philosophy student.

The influence of Gnosticism can be readily dismissed too. Again, there is no evidence of ideas from either ancient Gnostics, or modern revivalist groups that use the name. If ‘Gnosticism’ is used in a generic sense, to indicate that the Heaven’s Gate group believed in a higher level of existence, to which only initiates could gain access, then any claim that the group is ‘Gnostic’ is merely descriptive, and gives no clue to any real or supposed influence. The group never used the term, and the notion of a ‘Next Level Above Human’ can be easily accounted for by reference to UFOlogy and science fiction: there is no need to look to Gnosticism for any explanation. Applewhite’s ideas can largely be accounted for in terms of his idiosyncratic understanding of the Bible.

Applewhite's reading of Revelation has some common elements with mainstream Christianity. There is an acknowledgement of two classes of people: those who are chosen to 'ascend', and those who are left behind on the earth. He perceived those destined for 'the Next Level' as being confronted by forces of evil — the Luciferians in his terminology — who had misled humanity and created evil on the Earth, to the extent that it was now beyond any redemption. He acknowledged a period of tribulation which would anticipate the final culmination in which good would triumph over evil for those destined to proceed to the Next Level.

His own distinctive interpretation of the passage is fairly evident. First, there is the identity of 'The Two', which, as I have already mentioned, was none other than the two leaders Nettles and Applewhite. Importantly, the interpretation of the passage is physicalistic rather than spiritual. 'Come up here,' means literal ascent: as Applewhite taught, heaven is not a metaphysical realm, but rather the Next Level is located within physical space, to be reached by the spacecraft that was coming to collect its crew. The reference to overpowering and killing (11:7) again is literal: the only way to gain access to the spacecraft is through death, three and a half days after which a resurrection and ascension would follow. As events turned out, the picture of the rest of humanity gazing on the dead bodies was fulfilled in the enormous media coverage which the group received. Mention of earthquakes, particularly in the San Diego area, could understandably be taken as literal, since San Diego country is located amidst a number of earthquake faults, and the whole area of California is particularly prone to seismic

disturbance. (Indeed this is sometimes adduced as an explanation for the popularity of apocalyptic sects in that region.)

The reference to the three and a half days is nonetheless associated with Jesus. Applewhite taught that there were several windows of opportunity for human beings to ascend to the Next Level, and that such windows appeared approximately every two thousand years. It is not without significance that the year 1997 was 2000 years on from the year 4 B.C.E., a date commonly given for the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. As well as being a reference to Applewhite's 'crew', the verse also refers to Jesus' death and resurrection. Applewhite taught that Jesus was a 'tagged' human individual, born of a human mother, but conceived by an extra-terrestrial. The purpose of his appearance on earth was to show how it was possible to change one's physical body 'into a body of the kingdom of heaven through a *natural* process' (Steiger and Hewes, 1997, p.179; their italics). This new body had remarkable properties: for example it appeared to be capable of suddenly appearing and vanishing, and able to pass through closed doors. However, it was still a body of flesh and blood, as evidenced by Jesus' ability to eat and drink, and his invitation to Thomas to feel his wounded side (Steiger and Hewes, 1997, p.180). The final incident in Jesus' life was his ascension, in which it is recounted that a cloud took him back up into heaven: predictably, Applewhite took 'cloud' to mean 'spaceship' and hence Jesus' ascension was his reclamation by the space crew from the Next Level.

Just as Jesus obtained his kingdom of heaven through death and resurrection, and forty days later was taken back up into the Next Level, so Applewhite's 'crew' could expect to

receive their new bodies by their own death and subsequent resurrection, after which their new 'kingdom of heaven' bodies would be taken up into the spacecraft that awaited them.

### *Post-modern analysis*

Although such an interpretation of the Bible would be laughed out of court by mainstream scholars, Applewhite was not theologically illiterate, having experienced some formal training in theology, albeit brief, as we have seen. It is unlikely that he formally studied the Book of Revelation, but at least he would be aware of the kind of approach that was characteristic of mainstream Christian scholarship. Why, then, did he offer an interpretation of parts of the Bible to which no reputable scholar would give the slightest credence?

What follows is somewhat more exploratory than what has gone before. I intend to analyze the reasons for Heaven's Gate's distinctive interpretations of the Book of Revelation by using the concept of post-modernity. It is important not to confuse post-modernity with post-modernism. The latter is a school of thought, or — more accurately — a number of related currents of thinking (one hesitates to say theories, since post-modernism typically rejects over-arching theory) associated with various key thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-François Lyotard. Post-modernity is the condition which is attributed to late twentieth century and early twenty-first century society.

James Beckford identifies four key features of postmodernity:

1. A refusal to regard positivistic, rationalistic, instrumental criteria as the sole or exclusive standard of worthwhile knowledge.
2. A willingness to combine symbols from disparate codes or frameworks of meaning, even at the cost of disjunctions and eclecticism.
3. A celebration of spontaneity, fragmentation, superficiality, irony and playfulness.
4. A willingness to abandon the search for over-arching or triumphalist myths, narratives or frameworks of knowledge. (Beckford, 1992; in Wilson, 1992, p.19.)

Beckford's first set of criteria are plainly evident in the Heaven's Gate worldview. Like the vast majority of new religions, its worldview had an internal coherence, and hence, it might be argued, a rationality of its own. Nonetheless, Applewhite's methods of biblical interpretation were such as would be totally rejected by any serious student of the Bible. For a start, he seems to pay no regard to the quality of the English translation. At times he uses the King James Version (1611), which is now seldom used in mainstream churches, and which would be judged totally inappropriate for providing an accurate rendering of the original texts. At other times, and more usually, he uses the Amplified Bible, sometimes including its amplified glosses on the translation, and at other times omitting them, for no obvious reason.

Although Heaven's Gate may appear to be an 'empirical' religion, having dispensed with supernatural entities such as gods, the idea of a 'demonstration' is something from which Nettles in particular held back. Members never became party to a sighting of the alien spacecraft, and even at the scenario of the communal suicide belief in the existence a craft hiding behind the Hale-Bopp comet was only accepted on Applewhite's authority. Followers were therefore not allowed to be wholly empirical in their reception of the Two's message, and firm verification was discouraged.

The group's synthesis of different frameworks of meaning is interesting. Heaven's Gate was not the first group to have combined UFOlogy with the Bible. As I have already stated, this has already been done by several UFO-religions. Unlike organizations such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, who have sought to expound the Book of Revelation systematically, and indeed to harmonize its ideas with the entirety of all the other books of Judaeo-Christian scripture, Applewhite made no attempt either to explain the book systematically, to discuss its relationship with other parts of scriptures, or indeed to study it as a whole. The totality of his exegesis consisted of using a very small number of verses of Revelation, for his own purposes, an combined with his other cosmological ideas about spacecraft and beings from the 'Next Level'.

Turning to the second feature of postmodernity — eclecticism, Applewhite pieced together fragments of information, from a variety of disparate sources. The idea of combining biblical exegesis with belief in space aliens is, of course, not new, and has its

pedigree in organizations like Unarius and the Aetherius Society, and, more popularly, in the writings of Erich von Däniken. However, Applewhite showed no interest in making his ideas part of a school of thought, or in developing a philosophical or theological system to legitimate them. Unlike certain NRMs, such as the Unification Church or ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness), the group was uninterested in developing a way of thinking that was capable of being defended in academic circles. Consistent with post-modernity, there were no 'grand theories' to explain or legitimate, or inherent connections between the disparate ideas, only fragments, blended together. The phenomenon is somewhat reminiscent of the well-known advertisement which associates a man smoking a cigar with Bach's Air on a G-String: there is no intrinsic connection, but they are drawn together for the advertiser's own immediate purpose.

The third feature (celebration of spontaneity, fragmentation, superficiality, irony and playfulness) may initially seem inappropriate on account of the tragic events that brought Heaven's Gate to its end. However, although the members themselves were subject to a highly structured existence within the organization, and exercised no originality or spontaneity of their own, but thoroughly complying with Ti and Do's instructions, Ti and Do were themselves unpredictable and spontaneous, changing the group's structure as it progressed, and issuing sudden instructions for members to convene at Wyoming and teaching a message from Judaeo-Christian scripture that was largely Applewhite's own creation. A degree of playfulness and frivolity can be perceived, too, in the adoption of the various silly names by the leaders, and their notion that affairs on the planet Earth are not intrinsically valuable, but are the results of a failed experiment by extra-terrestrials.

The final notion — the abandonment of triumphalist and over-arching myths — can be demonstrated in a number of ways. First, Applewhite was not seeking a form of scriptural exegesis that was valid for all time, but only for the ‘here and now’. It is not an exegesis that looks for the original meaning of a set of doctrines or a sacred text, traces its meaning through time, and perceives itself as standing within a continuous unbroken tradition.

A feature of ‘modernism’ is the attempt to analyze narratives diachronically rather than synchronically. For example, students of Christianity are typically taught to understand the Nicene Creed by examining the early debates between Arius and Athanasius, the early ‘ecumenical’ councils of Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus and Chalcedon, the meaning of Greek philosophical concepts such as *ousia* (being or substance), *homoousia* (of the same being) and *homoiousia* (of like substance), and so on. The scholar is meant to look at the origins in order to ascertain the meaning. This activity is not confined to Christian theology, but to a variety of academic disciplines: for example, in music the subject of musicology has been employed to ascertain what an ‘authentic’ performance of a piece of music ought to be like — ‘authentic’ meaning a definitive performance in the way the composer originally intended. Close examination has therefore been given to the musical conventions of the composer’s time, establishing the true text, free from editorial interpolations, and often ensuring that the original instruments (or at least replicas) were employed in the performance.

The underlying rationale of this thinking was that there were components of meaning: the author's meaning and the user's meaning. Ideally, one should prise off the latter, leaving the former behind in its 'pure' form. This way of thought underlies the phenomenological method in religious studies, in which early proponents such as Gerard van der Leeuw advocated *epochē* — the 'holding back' or 'bracketing' of one's assumptions in order to achieve 'eidetic vision', or the perception of the pure form of the phenomenon, unclouded by one's own prejudices and preconceptions.

Subsequent thinking has indicated that such a quest is an impossibility. As Bakhtin and others have suggested, the knower is inextricably in the known. This is all the more true of religious communities than of scholars: the latter professedly aim to approach texts diachronically as well as synchronically, but in the case of religious communities, a diachronic approach to texts can often be positively unhelpful. The Heaven's Gate group was not a community of scholars, examining the Book of Revelation against the history of early Jewish and Christian persecution, but a community that used selected texts to reinforce their own particular worldview. Given the presuppositions of Heaven's Gate, the Book of Revelation appropriately reinforced the ideas of two leaders having been specially selected for the important mission of bringing together the 'tagged' individuals — their 'crew' — and enabling them to find the spacecraft that supposedly awaited them. The injunction to 'Come on up' could therefore be interpreted as entailing physical ascension rather than metaphysical transformation.

The practice of reinterpreting texts to suit one's particular set of doctrines is not, of course, unprecedented. Arguably, early Christian thinkers did substantially the same with Jewish texts, construing many as cryptic prophecies announcing their newly announced messiah. Understandably, present-day Jewish writers such as Michael Hilton, Hyam Maccoby and others protest that such interpretations often wrench the text out of its context, doing violence to its original meaning. No doubt they are right, but meanings are adapted within religious communities, who put their own key doctrines into the texts, rather than bracket them and try to ascertain the author's original meaning. To take an analogy, there is a difference between buying a historical building, which one must preserve, museum-like, in its authentic form, and buying a home in which one intends to reside, making the necessary adaptations for one's personal convenience and comfort. Traditionally the scholar is more like the museum curator, attempting to preserve the authentic original form, while the follower of a religion is more like home-owner, who adapts and makes changes, as necessary.

It therefore follows that understanding a religious community involves more than an understanding of its texts, as traditionally understood. As Wittgenstein argued, 'the meaning of a word is its use in language' (I, 43), and to understand the meaning of any discourse one must understand the 'language game' that is being played, and the 'form of life' that is associated with the discourse. It is the community who ultimately decides what its religious texts mean, even if such texts are borrowed (as is often the case) from different community that existed at a previous time and place in human history. Biblical scholars are now increasingly emphasizing the notion of 'reader criticism' as a tool for

understanding the meaning of a text, contending that in previous periods there has somewhat too much emphasis on the background of the original author and his or her community, to exclusion of those who have used the texts. In some cases, such as Jewish scripture, there can be more than one category of user; hence interpreting Jewish prophetic writing can involve ascertaining how Jewish and Christian communities alike have regarded a particular passage.

Similar considerations pertain to new religious movements such as Heaven's Gate. Like the early Christians, they devised their own distinctive meanings of sacred texts. There is therefore limited force in counter-cult critiques that seek to demonstrate the ways in which such movements do violence to the meaning of scripture. The meaning of scripture is the meaning *for them*, and whether this is congruent with the text's original meaning is often a matter of little concern.

Finally, what is to be gained by analyzing Heaven's Gate's teachings in terms of post-modernity? Most obviously, any theoretical model facilitates explanation of a set of ideas and events rather than simply 'tells the story'. More specifically, such analysis helps us to identify a number of societal factors that were at work in Heaven's Gate phenomenon: apocalyptic ideas, attempted separation from the world, and fragmentary knowledge of philosophy, religion and space science. To the vast majority of people who remained outside the Heaven's Gate movement, it is not at all obvious how significant numbers of people could be persuaded to follow two leaders who used silly names, who claimed to be the unique fulfilments of biblical prophecy, and who had superficial knowledge of the

subject areas relevant to their teachings. The analysis I have offered, I hope, helps to demonstrate how an intellectual climate of superficiality and fragmentary knowledge helps to make this possible, and how a group's attempt to find life's purpose entails seeking a 'meaning for them' in a religious text, rather than a more over-arching comprehensive historical meaning, of the kind found within academia, from which Applewhite had long since been excluded.

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