

Approaching Heaven's Gate

On 26 March 1997 the news broke that some 39 members of a 'cult' known as Heaven's Gate had committed mass suicide in a suburb of San Diego, California. Few people had heard of the group, which had not featured in anti-cult literature, and was relatively unknown in the academic world. The almost universal ignorance of the group did not prevent anti-cult leaders securing interviews on television and radio, where they were designated as 'cult experts' and declared that this was 'a typical cult' demonstrating the dangers that 'cult involvement' posed for today's youth. Academics, who by their nature want to research their material thoroughly and provide measured judgements, were inevitably much slower to make their voices heard and to provide firm, reliable information.

Various contributors to this collection of essays recount the history of Heaven's Gate at various stages of its development, but a brief reminder might be helpful here. The group's leaders were Marshall Herff Applewhite (1931-1997) and Bonnie Lu Nettles (1927-1985), who claimed to be the Two Witnesses described in the Book of Revelation, and organised public lectures in various states in the US and Canada in 1975-1976. They took on pseudonyms of matching pairs, such as 'Guinea' and 'Pig', 'Bo' and 'Peep', and finally 'Te' and 'Do' (pronounced 'Doe'). Their message was a blend of biblical apocalyptic and UFOlogy, in which they offered seekers transition to 'The Next Evolutionary Level Above Human', claiming that a spacecraft would come to collect those who accepted this message. In 1996 the group rented a large mansion in Sante Fé, on the outskirts of San Diego, California, where they lived as a semi-reclusive community. In the same year, the Hale Bopp comet was sighted. Members believed another object was visible behind it, and which they

believed was the spacecraft with which they could rendezvous. After recording individual farewell video messages to family and friends, the 39 residents (including Applewhite) ended their lives. All but two of them were found lying under purple shrouds, wearing black trousers and Nike trainers; beside each bed was a small luggage case, suggesting an intended journey. A few of the male members had been castrated.

Over a decade later, there is still no academic book that specifically addresses the Heaven's Gate Group. One or two short popular books emerged months after the event, and served a useful purpose in their attempts to provide greater understanding of the group. Brad Steiger and Hayden Hewes, who authored *Inside Heaven's Gate*, had the advantage of having been acquainted with the Heaven's Gate leaders and members over twenty years before the disaster, when the group was then called Human Individual Metamorphosis (HIM). It was years later that a trickle of academic journal articles appeared, seeking to make sense of the phenomenon, although sociologists Robert Balch and David Taylor had also researched the group covertly as participant-observers in the 1970s.

It might be asked why this present collection of essays is needed. As time passes, the younger generation of students who sign up for courses in new religious movements (NRMs) no longer remembers Jonestown, Waco, the Solar Temple and Heaven's Gate. Indeed, an important issue in the study of NRMs generally is that the new soon becomes the old, and they become interesting not as issues in current affairs, but in the history of minority religious organisations. The fascination of Heaven's Gate, however, lies in a number of factors. It is the only example in these four groups where the mass deaths that brought the organisation to an end were unarguably suicides. At Jonestown, Jim Jones' aides were armed with machine

guns, apparently ready to shoot anyone who disloyally refused to imbibe the cyanide, or tried to escape into the jungle. Although members of the Waco group could have saved themselves by surrendering to the authorities, they were killed by the fire at the compound, or by gunshot wounds — apart from one or two survivors. At the Solar Temple, participants do not appear to have taken their own lives, but were shot, probably by leader Luc Jouret, although the positioning of the bodies suggested voluntary participation in a ceremonial ritual. It remains unknown whether members of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God wilfully committed suicide by barricading themselves inside the burning church; however, those who were later discovered in the mass graves could certainly have not ended up there of their own volition.

The dividing line between murder and suicide is not a sharp one. Whether it should be said that Jonestown was a 'mass suicide' is a moot point, when members appear to have had a Hobson's choice about *how* to die, rather than *whether* to do so. In Heaven's Gate, by contrast, the fact that the bodies were laid out so methodically, with attention to exact detail, indicates that the deaths were planned with care, and involved substantial preparation time. If anyone had second thoughts about the wisdom of their proposed action, there must have been time to reconsider. Escape was possible, if any member had been minded to opt out. There were no armed guards, and doors and windows provided normal access. Although the house in which the suicides occurred was in an outlying suburb of San Diego, without access to public transport, it was secluded rather than isolated; a rather long access road was shared by neighbours, who were within easy walking distance.

The group was distinctive in its blend of source material, drawing on a somewhat eclectic mix of biblical exegesis, popular culture and UFOlogy, coupled with its use of the Internet, which was only in its infancy in 1997. Applewhite's interpretation of Christian scripture appears to have completely ignored any conventional study of the Bible he may have undertaken during his brief period as a student at Union Theological Seminary. Instead, he appears to have preferred an idiosyncratic interpretation, linking it with UFOlogy and science fiction. The Heaven's Gate religion displayed a postmodern tendency to combine sources that are not conventionally or readily juxtaposed, and the various contributors to the present collection comment particularly on the themes of postmodernism and popular culture.

The 'New Age'

In order to understand Heaven's Gate it is necessary to explore the US countercultural background of the period, with its interest in alternative lifestyles and spiritualities to those of traditional Christianity and capitalism. The 'hippies' gained particular media coverage, being renowned for their distinctive 'flower power' attire, the communes they established, their experimentation with recreational drugs, and their emphasis on love and peace, contrasting themselves particularly with the politics of the Vietnam war. Typically, New Agers placed a high value upon the self, regarding it as potentially good, even divine, in contrast with the traditional Christian doctrine of original sin. A key characteristic of the New Age was personal spiritual seeking, rather than any claim to have found absolute truth in some form of organised religion. First hand spiritual experience was particularly sought, rather than acceptance of religious truth on the basis of ecclesiastical or scriptural authority. Allied to the rejection of traditional authority and the belief in the integrity of the self came the concept of the seeker. The spiritual journey is a personal quest, and the individual has the task of

exploring a variety of spiritual options, selecting and combining whatever appears to meet one's spiritual needs at any given time.

The New Age contained an optimism that hoped for a brighter future. This 'New Age' was the Age of Aquarius, in which the earth was beginning to fall under the influence of the zodiacal constellation Aquarius, having spent two thousand years under Pisces. Pisces, the fish, is an important Christian symbol, and the emergence from Pisces signalled the eclipse of the Christian Church's influence on our planet. The interest in the zodiac highlights the interest of many New Agers in astrology. What was taking place beyond the earth was significant, and what conventional science taught about the stars and planets at best fell short of the whole truth about the universe. It is therefore not surprising that in sectors of the New Age an interest arose in UFOs and extraterrestrial life.

It may seem contradictory that a link should be made between the somewhat nebulous New Age Movement, the characteristics of which are rejection of authority and organised religion, personal seeking and eclecticism with the Heaven's Gate group, which was highly organised, with Applewhite and Nettles having complete authority, and with its providing confident answers to life's questions, thus marking an end to members' spiritual journey rather than yet another part of one's search. Several points are worth noting in this regard. First, the characteristics of New Age which I have identified above are merely salient features, not all of which are present in every one, or even most of, New Age groups. Second, the movement's early years in the 1970s involved a much looser organisation, with public invitations to lectures on UFOs by Nettles and Applewhite. Only a small minority of the audience took further steps to deepen their involvement, and hence presumably their brief

acquaintance with the group's ideas became a disposable part of a spiritual or intellectual journey. Third, as various contributors point out, the group itself underwent change. As Benjamin Ethan Zeller points out, in its earlier years individual members were permitted to relay messages from the extraterrestrials, but later, as Applewhite felt the need to assert his own authority over the group, all purported communication from the Next Level required his endorsement. Paul Heelas, in his study of the New Age Movement, includes firmly structured organisations such as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), Osho and the so-called 'self religions' such as *est* (Erhard Seminar Training), among others. A well-established organisation with a tight structure can nonetheless become a part of an individual's spiritual journey.

UFOlogy and religion

As we have noted, UFOs and extraterrestrials were dominant themes in the Heaven's Gate worldview. Whether such interests should be viewed as countercultural is debateable. On the one hand, the vast majority of US and European citizens claim no such contacts with extraterrestrials, and have no active interest in the UFO phenomenon. On the other hand, space exploration is very much part of the agenda of the US, Russia and Europe, and the possibility of there being intelligent life in other parts of the universe is a matter of serious scientific investigation. In 1960 the radio astronomer Frank Drake pioneered the quest to detect radio signals from potential extra-terrestrial life forms in space. Drake's search was pursued first by Russian scientists in the 1960s, and in the early 1970s NASA's Ames Research Center and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) in Pasadena, California, developed a number of SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence) programmes, involving transmitting radio signals as well as searching for them, and inscribing messages on pioneer

space probes that would provide extra-terrestrials with information about the earth's position within the galaxy, together with messages in mathematical and scientific 'languages' that would demonstrate to alien life-forms that intelligent life existed on the planet Earth.

However, even before the inception of these scientific studies, there were those who claimed that we did not have to search for signs of extra-terrestrial life. Space aliens, they believed, had already been observed, and indeed had landed on Earth. Serious public attention was given to the UFO phenomenon in 1947 when airline pilot Kenneth Arnold claimed a sighting of three vessels flying past his aircraft, which appeared to be travelling at an apparently impossible speed of 1,656 miles per hour. This was no visual hallucination: his instruments verified the presence and the speed of these craft. When later questioned about his experience Arnold reported that the vessels had the appearance of 'saucers'. Arnold's description appears to have originated the expression 'flying saucers', and made Arnold the object of much ridicule. However, the fact that Arnold was a professional pilot, and well acquainted with objects in the sky lent credence to his report: he certainly could not be dismissed as an attention-seeking eccentric.

In the same year the famous Roswell incident occurred. On 2 July 1947 a farmer at Foster Ranch, near Corona, New Mexico reported a nearby explosion, followed by the discovery of metallic debris on a nearby field, which appeared to be the remains of a flying craft.

According to some reports, the authorities discovered five bodies, none of whom were recognisably human. One, apparently, was still alive, and was taken away for scientific investigation, and who was able to communicate telepathically with the investigators. The incident remains controversial, with believers in extraterrestrial visitation averring that there

was an FBI 'cover up', while more conservative commentators suggested that the object might have been a weather balloon, and that the allegation concerning bodies being discovered was entirely fictitious.

A further incident is said to have occurred on 25 March 1948: the Aztec UFO crash. No crash was directly observed, but allegedly a remarkable undamaged spacecraft was found at Aztec, 99.99 feet in diameter, made of heatproof metal, without any screws, rivets or welding to hold it together. Inside the hold were 14 humanoid bodies with the characteristic large slanting eyes, together with a small nose and mouth. They were reportedly 42 inches in height, on average, and typically weighed 40 pounds. The phenomenon was apparently investigated by a distinguished team of scientists, including astrophysicists, aeronautical engineers and military personnel.

Wherever the truth may lie, it is undeniable that UFOs exist — provided the claim simply means that objects in the sky have been sighted which cannot readily be identified and for which there is no obvious scientific explanation. Whether these are the vessels of extraterrestrials is, of course, much less certain, but evidently the possibility is not so absurd as to be ruled out by the scientific community. Indeed, an entire centre has been set up in Chicago — the Center for UFO Studies (CUFOS). Allen Hynek, the Center's director, distinguishes five types of 'close encounter' (CE) with extraterrestrial life. The phrase 'close encounters of the third kind' became widely known through the science fiction film bearing that title, the 'third kind' being a situation where extraterrestrial creatures reportedly appear — which is how the film ends. The first kind is a straightforward claimed sighting of a UFO: no evidence remains, and no contact is made with any occupants. The second kind involves a

UFO sighting where evidence is left, for example scorch marks on the ground, or debris. In the fourth kind of close encounter the observer is taken away in the alien craft — an alien abduction, sometimes allegedly for scientific research, and sometimes to undergo physical abuse. In the fifth variety, there is communication between the aliens and the observer, as for example Claude Vorilhon, the founder of the Raëlian organisation, has claimed. Raël claims to have discovered a spacecraft and met its occupant, who came from a more advanced civilisation, and who later took Raël on a space voyage to their planet.

The wide-spread interest in extraterrestrial life found expression within popular culture in television series such as Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek*, first screened in 1969, and in films such as *Star Wars* (released in 1977), *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (also 1977), and *E.T.* (1982). Popular culture interacted with the popular interest in UFOs: the number of reported sightings has appeared to increase in parallel with the increasing popularity of television series and films about aliens and UFOs, and the descriptions of reported spacecraft seem to be related to their portrayals in popular media. There were peaks in reported sightings following the release of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* in 1977 and of the blockbuster *Independence Day* in 1996 — although, curiously, the year 1982, when *E.T.* was released, marked a dip in such reports. In the US the National UFO Reporting Center has reported 'tens of thousands' of calls since 1974, and in Britain the year 1996 brought about a peak of 600 such reports, contributing to a total of approximately 11,000 sightings in Britain between the early 1900s and the 2000s.

The UFO phenomenon has an ideal blend of themes and contributors to attract wide curiosity, involving ardent believers, sceptics and debunkers, hoaxers, scientists, military intelligence

personnel, professed victims of alien sightings and abductions, and psychiatrists who have sought to determine their state of mental health. In addition to reported direct sightings, the period following 1996 was also marked by claims of secondary evidence of extraterrestrial visitation, for example crop circles and cattle mutilations. Although many of the reported sightings have been found to have rational explanations, being variously aircraft, meteors, lights, and other natural objects, there remains a core of phenomena that have not been explained. Allied to this, allegations of military and government 'cover-ups' have helped to fuel public curiosity. On 5 August 2010 it was revealed that members of Prime Minister Winston Churchill's cabinet met with military intelligence officials and agreed that reports of unusual craft should be kept as classified information. After collaborating with General Dwight Eisenhower, he instructed that one particular report of an encounter between RAF bombers and a UFO should be kept secret for at least fifty years, to avoid mass panic.

This blend of claimed experiences, science fiction, scientific investigation, military intelligence, and conspiracy theories was an ideal combination for arousing public interest in UFOlogy. Added to these is an inherent conviction, held by many, that the sheer vastness of the universe makes it unlikely that the Earth is the only life-sustaining planet. A recent online survey by the SETI Institute posed the question, 'Are we alone in the universe?' and found that only 3.64 percent of respondents agreed with the proposition 'Yes, we are on our own', while 77.34 percent expressed the opinion, 'No. There must be life out there. We just need to keep looking.' A further 18.98 percent supported the statement, 'Probably not. But we may never find other life.' (SETI Institute, 2010).¹

The UFO-religions.

The interest in UFOs and extraterrestrials had its religious dimension. Alice Bailey (1880-1949), founder of the Arcane School, wrote about an advanced spiritual hierarchy that was particularly associated with the Sirius star system, the planet Venus and Shamballa (*sic*), which was a mythical land located in the 'higher ethers', which the Christ was inhabiting, in anticipation of his imminent return to Earth. A number of New Age spiritual teachers claimed to have received spiritual messages from extraterrestrials, whom they regarded as spirit guides, and whose teachings they disseminated in the form of 'channelled' writings. Ernest L. Norman and his wife had founded Unarius — Science of Life in 1954, claiming contact with 'space brothers' from other planets, whose teachings they channelled. Another noteworthy example is *The Urantia Book*, said to have been transmitted by a group of celestial beings to an unnamed recipient between 1934 and 1935, and published by the Urantia Foundation in 1955. In the same year, the Aetherius Society was founded by George King, who allegedly received a commission from the 'spiritual Hierarchy of Earth' to be 'the voice of Interplanetary Parliament' — a body that operated, evidently, from the planet Saturn.

A later attempt to link extraterrestrials with religion was Erich von Däniken's *Chariots of the Gods*, which was published in 1968 and sold millions of copies. Von Däniken's thesis was not exclusively about Christianity, however. He argued that Egyptian pyramids and Inca ruins signalled ancient civilisations that had been visited from outer space. His book makes a small number of allusions to Judaeo-Christian scripture, however: Elijah is taken up to heaven in a chariot, and the prophet Ezekiel sees a chariot descend from the sky with wheels containing multitudinous eyes. What else might these be than craft containing visitors from some alien planet? Von Däniken's hypothesis presented not only a means of understanding the UFO phenomenon, but offered the additional benefit of affording explanations of passages of

scripture that were either difficult to understand, or incidents in the Bible that had been difficult to explain rationally. The popular interest in von Däniken was part of the wider cultural milieu from which the UFO-religions (as they are sometimes known) emerged.

The notion of biblical allusions to these space visitors is echoed in UFO-religions such as the Raëlian organisation. The Raëlian organisation reportedly began with a CE4 in 1973, when founder-leader Claude Vorilhon — better known to his followers as Raël — claims to have discovered a spacecraft and met its occupant, who claimed to come from a more advanced civilisation (the Elohim), and who later took Raël on a space voyage to their planet, where he met Yahweh, their leader. Raëlians deny any borrowing of ideas from von Däniken: after all, why should one borrow ideas when one has been privileged with direct acquaintance of these space visitors? Nonetheless, von Däniken's writings formed part of the cultic milieu in which UFO-religions emerged, sharing the common theme of ancient extraterrestrial visitors whose activities were reported in somewhat garbled ways by our race of primitive humans who did not fully understand them.

The label 'UFO-religions' is not always welcomed by their members, possibly for two reasons. The first relates to the 'U' in 'UFO'. The flying objects in which they are interested are not unidentified: their identity is regarded as being thoroughly known. Their occupants are visitors from some other planet who wish to share their superior technology or spiritual truths with humanity. Second, UFOs are often related to the activity of UFO-spotting, and conjure up images of dilettantes hunting out likely sites for alien landings, in the hope of spotting one of these alien craft. UFO spotting is typically regarded as a trivial activity, and

one that is usually discouraged within the UFO-religions. When Nettles and Applewhite commenced their series of public meetings, their invitations read:

UFO's

Why they are here.

Who they have come for.

When they will leave.

NOT a discussion of UFO sightings or phenomena.

This last line is important. There is no point in discussing whether UFO sightings are real, any more than a mainstream Christian congregation would wish to discuss whether God exists. The existence of extraterrestrials is not a conclusion resulting from discussion of the topic, but rather the premise on which the resulting religion is built. For the follower, UFOs are real: the more pertinent question is why they have come, and how humankind should respond.

There is a further reason for discouraging members from contacting the extraterrestrials. As Applewhite discovered, a plethora of claimed messages on the part of members is confusing, particularly if they lack consistency, and they militate against the authority of the group's leader. As Zeller points out, Applewhite had to stipulate that all such communications had to be related to and approved by himself. Raël avoided this problem by ensuring that he had a monopoly of the extraterrestrial contact. No members of the Raëlian organisation claim contact with the Elohim, and only two very close friends are ever claimed to have been present when Raël has been contacted. The rule that only the leader may be party to alien

contact serves to increase his (or her) authority. He is the 'channel' through which contact can be established, effectively fulfilling the role of a shaman, by facilitating contact with this other world on behalf of the remainder of the group.

The turn of the millennium

Another factor affecting counter-cultural spirituality was the advent of the new millennium. Although there was no abrupt break in time between the last seconds of the year 1999 and the first moments of 2000 there seemed to be something significant, even unsettling about the change of digit from 1 to 2 in our year dates. It was publicly feared that computers would be unable to cope with the transition — the famous Y2K scare — either because they were only designed to recognise the last two digits of a year, and hence would confuse 2000 with 1900, or else because 2000 would be a leap year when 1900 was not, thus throwing dates and days out of kilter after 29 February. Interestingly, when computers functioned normally on 1 January 2000, there were those who dealt with the failed secular prophecy by transferring the date, expecting the real chaos to occur either on 29 February or even on 1 January 2001.

Although some churches marked the new millennium by affixing small plaques on their walls, stating 'The millennium is Christ's 2000th birthday', most people realised that statement was strictly incorrect. Not only was there no zero year between 1 BCE and 1 CE, but neither of these two days was the authentic date of Jesus' birth: probably 4 BCE, or possibly 7 BCE, those being the two most favoured dates by historians. The belief that a further significant cosmic event should occur two thousand years later has been prompted by several considerations. One is the notion of the 'multiple fulfilment' of biblical prophecy — a doctrine of which David Koresh's Branch Davidians would certainly have been aware. This

belief entails that the biblical authors were initially speaking of their own times, but that their prophecy would be fulfilled again at a later stage in human history. Some Adventists, who subscribed to this doctrine, also regarded the respective time periods as equal in length: thus one should expect the lengths of Old Testament Age and the Gospel Age to be equal in duration, perhaps with historical parallels between them. Outside the Christian tradition, as previously mentioned, 2,000 years is typically regarded as astrological significant, being the length of a zodiacal period. In other traditions, such as Zoroastrian tradition, 2,000 years is regarded as the intervening period between the descents of divine emissaries who offer salvation to the world.

It is possible that the Waco Branch Davidian group may have assumed a 7 BCE date for Jesus' birth, and hence viewed the year 1993 as significant, being exactly 2,000 years later. Drawing on the notion of multiple prophetic fulfilment, David Koresh styled himself as the antitypical messiah, who was empowered to open the 'seventh seal' described in the Book of Revelation. Was it a mere coincidence that Koresh was the son of a carpenter, with a mother called Mary, and died at the age of 33 — the same age as Jesus at his crucifixion? The Solar Temple leaders plainly saw a connection between what they were trying to achieve and the activities of the Branch Davidians of Waco. In a recorded conversation, Luc Jouret says to co-leader Joseph di Mambro, 'They beat us to the punch', referring to Koresh's organisation (Mayer 1998; quoted in Lewis, 2006, p.113.) (It is unclear why the Solar Temple deaths should occur a year later than the Waco ones: perhaps their calendrial calculations differed, or perhaps they only loosely associated death with the end of the millennium.) If the Heaven's Gate deaths were associated with Jesus' birth, the group must have assumed a 4 BCE date, since the year 1997 was exactly 2,000 years on from that date.

The anthology

The essays that have been collected to form the content of this book cover a range of salient issues relating to Heaven's Gate. Chapter Two consists of primary source material — the '88 *Update* written by Marshall Applewhite, to which several of the contributors refer. This essay is important for its first-hand account of the history of the Heaven's Gate group up to 1988, and also for its introduction to its principal teachings. The subsequent article is by Robert W. Balch — 'Seekers and Saucers': "The Role of the Cultic Milieu in Joining a UFO Cult" — is one of the earliest articles to be written on the group, having first appeared in 1977. Balch's study is the result of covert research, undertaken with David Taylor. He describes the group's early days, and endeavours to account for seekers' conversion to the organisation, arguing that the assumption of roles within such a group is a key factor in conversion, rather than the more popular but less academic 'brainwashing' theory.

The collective suicide in Heaven's Gate caused the media, as well as the public more widely, to apply adjectives like 'bizarre' to the group. 'Making the strange familiar and the familiar strange' — the subtitle of Mark W. Muesse's essay 'Religious Studies and "Heaven's Gate"' — is a principle frequently invoked by ethnographers. If we have a religion, it seems familiar to us, and its sheer familiarity makes it seem normative, and also makes it difficult to explain to those who are unfamiliar with it. Other worldviews, by contrast, are unfamiliar, and the student of religion needs to make transition from unfamiliarity to familiarity, attempting to make sense of what initially may seem strange. It is tempting, Muesse argues, to demonise the Heaven's Gate members, but, equally, the beliefs and practices of mainstream religion can appear strange to those outside it. Patricia Goermann considers the ways in which the

media have perpetuated the image of Heaven's Gate as a 'bizarre cult' with 'wacky' and 'brainwashed' members. As an alternative to the 'brainwashing' theory, Goermann outlines a number of sociological models of cult formation, which, she argues, contributes to a better understanding of the group than the ones put forward in the media.

While Winston Davis does not subscribe to the simplistic popular theories of brainwashing, he argues that the Heaven's Gate members were subject to social and psychological conditioning. 'Cult members,' he contends, 'sometimes *do* appear to be zombies.' He believes that Applewhite's leadership served to suppress individuality, and to demand obedience. Obedience and conformity, together with isolation and distancing from the outside world, were presented as more important than individual responsibility. Being passive, obedient and submissive was the expectation of the loyal member.

Hugh B. Urban's title 'The Devil at Heaven's Gate' is prompted by Jonathan Z. Smith's essay, 'The Devil in Mr Jones', in which Smith argues against demonising Jim Jones, the leader of the Peoples Temple in Jonestown, Guyana, and endeavours to provide a rational explanation for the deaths of its 914 members. Urban suggests that Smith employed Enlightenment rationalism, however, and that post-Enlightenment hermeneutical tools are needed to explain Heaven's Gate. Drawing on Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault and others, he contends that the Heaven's Gate group was a postmodern pastiche, combining science fiction, UFOlogy and Christian fundamentalism. Its followers experienced alienation from twentieth-century capitalist society, rejecting its values of greed, consumption, and sense-gratification. Nonetheless, Applewhite devised a religion for a technological age, involving copious use of the Internet, and employing terms drawn from computing and information

technology: for example, he spoke of the soul having a 'hard drive' and requiring 'reprogramming', and taught that the members were implanted with electronic 'tags' or 'chips' that would enable them to enter The Evolutionary Next Level Above Human. The suicides are not to be explained in terms of rationality or intelligibility, but rather as 'symbolic exchange', in which the members radically rejected the values of their culture in their quest for the freedom and transcendence that the Next Level afforded.

Douglas E. Cowan takes issue with Urban regarding the significance of the Internet in understanding Heaven's Gate and its alleged power as a recruiting tool. As he points out, the Internet was in its infancy in 1997, and not well understood either by media presenters or by scholars of religion. Although the group ran an Internet business called Higher Source, and engaged in online discussion, the group had existed for many years before the Internet's inception. The linking of the suicides with Internet activity, he contends, is little more than an anticult scare, given momentum by the media. The web is equally a surveillance tool, and a vehicle for anticult propaganda.

Benjamin Ethan Zeller agrees that the media linkage of the suicides with the Internet and with the Hale-Bopp comet was exaggerated. His 'Scaling Heaven's Gate' provides a much more detailed diachronic analysis of the group's teachings, particularly identifying a number of important changes following the death of Bonnie Nettles in 1985. With Applewhite as the sole leader of the group, the New Age components diminished, giving way to Protestant-derived ideas of dispensationalism and belief in an imminent Rapture. A kind of predestinarianism was taught, whereby only 'tagged' individuals were guaranteed salvation in the Next Level. Before Nettles' death, it was believed that a spaceship would descend to

collect followers, but its failure to materialise created cognitive dissonance, which was resolved by the belief that one had actively to leave one's material body in order to board the Next Level craft. Zeller argues that, despite the unconventional nature of such beliefs, the group remained quintessentially American, insofar as they accepted a Cartesian mind-body dualism, maintained an interest in apocalypticism and in decoding Revelation, and taught personal salvation through a coming saviour figure.

The final essay in this collection, 'Come on up, and I will show thee', continues the themes of biblical exegesis, apocalyptic expectation and postmodernism. If the Heaven's Gate suicides cannot be dismissed as the actions of brainwashed zombies, we must look to the ideas of the group as having some kind of persuasiveness. Although Applewhite's interpretation of the Book of Revelation lie at a considerable distance from those of mainstream biblical scholars, nonetheless Applewhite offered an interpretation that spoke to his audience, rather than one that would be understood by first-century Christians. Applewhite not only attempted to make sense of biblical narrative whose meaning eludes most mainstream Christians, but combined this understanding of the book with other enigmatic questions such as the existence of extraterrestrial life, the nature of UFOs, and indeed the meaning of existence.

One theme that is not substantially addressed in this volume is violence. There has been a tendency to associate millennial religious groups with violence, in the wake of Jonestown, Waco, the Solar Temple and the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God in Uganda. Catherine Wessinger describes the deaths as the 'violent act', the members' deaths were peaceful and apparently voluntary. Each member appears to have taken his or her own life. Unlike the Solar Temple, no individual's death was caused by another, although of

course the uniform way in which everyone died was evidence of collaborative activity. Unlike Jonestown, there were no guards on duty who were commissioned to kill members who refused to take their own lives. The Heaven's Gate group was not trying to evade authorities or anticult campaigners; it was not under siege, like the Waco group, and, unlike the Jews at Masada in 73 C.E. the mass suicides were not avoid conquest or capture. The 39 deaths cannot be construed as civil disobedience: although the group rejected conventional values, there were no specific laws that they were attempting to challenge. Urban mentions in passing the fact that the group had begun to acquire firearms but, as he notes, these weapons were stored in an outhouse. There was no evidence of any plan to use, them, however, and it is worth noting that in 1997 some 40 percent of US households claimed to have a gun. Unless one adopts an unduly broad definition of violence to encompass forms of unnatural death, Heaven's Gate was not a violent group. There are no accounts of power struggles, challenges to the leadership, or even significant quarrels among members. Even the death the members underwent was a peaceful one.

Conclusions?

Academics like to debate matters, and seldom reach a consensus, especially in controversial fields such as new religious movements. Are there firm conclusions, then, that can be drawn from the discussion in this volume?

First, it would appear that quite ordinary people can be drawn to NRMs, and indeed joined Heaven's Gate. There is no evidence that those who joined were psychologically disturbed, unintelligent, 'dispossessed', or in any obviously way vulnerable. It was not a 'youth cult': the average age of the deceased was 47, and they had held down responsible — in some cases

professional — jobs before joining. As Urban points out, members' ages ranged from 26 to 72, and represented a fairly typical cross-section of the US population.

Second, contrary to what one might expect, the two survivors of Heaven's Gate did not regard themselves as having had a fortunate escape. A year later former members Chuck Humphrey (known as Rkkody), and Wayne Cooke (Jstody), booked themselves into a motel at Encinitas, California, and attempted to replicate the 1997 mass suicides. Cooke succeeded, while Humphrey failed. However, on 17 February 1998, Humphrey was found dead in a tent near Ehrenberg, California, having placed a plastic bag over his head, with a pipe connected to a supply of carbon monoxide. He was wearing the standard black trainers and a black T-shirt bearing a patch that read, 'Heaven's Gate Away Team'.

Humphrey and Cooke's actions suggest a third conclusion that can be drawn. They indicate that the idea of death as a transition to the Next Level was a genuinely held belief, that could be implicated in the absence of the group's leader, rather than an action that was coerced as a result of some kind of coercion, brainwashing, hypnotic suggestion or whatever. The academic community in general does not support the anticult 'brainwashing' hypothesis, and none of the contributors to this anthology do so. Certainly in any organisation, whether religious or secular, there is peer pressure, and the group's highly routinised lifestyle no doubt intensified pressure to conform. The group's relative isolation tended to preclude members' opportunities to entertain external criticism of their worldview. Unlike a university, where diversity of opinion is encouraged, ideas challenged, and competing hypotheses advanced, a closed religious group affords no opportunity to subject its beliefs to external scrutiny. Despite the very significant differences between the Peoples Temple, the

Branch Davidians of Waco, the Order of the Solar Temple, and the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God, one common feature that they share with Heaven's Gate is their relative isolation.

Fourthly, the relative lack of challenge to the Heaven's Gate worldview does not indicate that the mass suicide was an irrational act, in that members' reasoning processes were bypassed. The group's history involves periods in which the Heaven's Gate leaders lectured publicly, inviting questions and responding to them. Joining was not easy, and in 1976, when The Two 'reappeared', their followers had the task of finding the camp's remote location and making their way there. There was ample opportunity for members to reconsider their commitment, and, as Zeller shows, the extremely high attrition rate — dropping from 200 in 1975 to a mere 40 in 1997 — demonstrates that most of those who initially joined thought better of their decision. It should also be remembered that the vast majority of those who attended Applewhite's and Nettles' public lectures did not join. It is a common fact of life that people rationally evaluate evidence differently, reaching different conclusions and often resulting in small minorities upholding unpopular positions. To be prepared to die for a minority belief system such as Heaven's Gate's is certainly unusual, and readers can no doubt think of all kinds of reasons for rejecting the group's ideas. Nonetheless, the Heaven's Gate worldview had its own rationale and internal coherence, that impelled its members to view death as the means to attain The Next Evolutionary Level Above Human. To its members, death seemed a thoroughly rational choice, and those who rejected Applewhite's offer were forfeiting an eternal opportunity. As the group stated on its web site:

The true meaning of “suicide” is *to turn against the Next Level when it is being offered*. In these last days, we are focused on two primary tasks: one - of making a last attempt at telling the truth about how the Next Level may be entered (our last effort at offering to individuals of this civilization the way to avoid “suicide”); and two - taking advantage of the rare opportunity we have each day - to work individually on our personal overcoming and change, in preparation for entering the Kingdom of Heaven. (Heaven's Gate, 1996.)

Bibliography

Bailey, Alice A. (1922). *Initiation: Human and Solar* New York: Lucis Trust.

Bailey, Alice A. (1925). *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire* 1932 New York: Lucis Trust.

BBC (2009) Are UFO sightings linked to sci-fi films? 17 August. Accessible at URL:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/8205424.stm> Accessed 5 August 2010.

Balch, Robert W. (1980). ‘Looking Behind the Scenes in a Religious Cult: Implications for the Study of Conversion’. *Sociological Analysis*, 41 (2): 137-143.

Heaven's Gate (1996). ‘Our Position against Suicide’. Accessible at URL:

<http://www.heavensgate.com/misc/letter.htm> Accessed 12 August 2010.

Heelas, Paul. *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986.

Lewis, James R. (ed.) (2006). *The Order of the Solar Temple: The Temple of Death*.

Aldershot: Ashgate.

McCutcheon, Russell T. (1999). *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*.

London: Cassell.

Milmo, Cahal (2010). 'Did Churchill and Eisenhower cover up UFO encounter?' *The*

Independent, 5 August 2010. Accessible online at URL:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/did-churchill-and-eisenhower-cover-up-ufo-encounter-2043641.html> Accessed 5 August 2010.

Raël (Claude Vorilhon). *The Message Given to Me by Extra-Terrestrials: They Took Me to Their Planet*. Tokyo: AOM Corporation, 1992.

SETI Institute (2010). The Mission of the SETI Institute. Accessible at URL:

<http://www.seti.org/Page.aspx?pid=1366> Accessed 5 August 2010.

Smith, Jonathan Z. (1980). 'The Devil in Mr. Jones'; in McCutcheon (1999), pp.370-389.

Universe Today (2009). Report: UFO Sightings Coincide with Popular Sci-Fi Films, TV.

Accessible online at URL: <http://www.universetoday.com/37713/report-ufo-sightings-coincide-with-popular-sci-fi-films-tv> Accessed 5 August 2010.

Urantia Foundation. *The Urantia Book*. Chicago: Urantia Foundation, 1955.

Von Däniken, Erich. *Chariots of the Gods? Unsolved Mysteries of the Past*. London: Corgi, 1976.

¹ These are the reported response rates at the time of writing. The survey is on-going, and these statistics change slightly as responses are recorded.