

Suicide, Suicidology, and Heaven's Gate

I sometimes introduce my class session on 'suicide cults' by mischievously telling the students that I am a messiah who is organizing a mass suicide the following day. On enquiring whether I have any supporters, unsurprisingly I find that there are none. In our everyday world of 'normality', most of us do not join communal religious groups that require total commitment. Although many may be open-minded about life on another planet, most of us do not believe that we have a specially designated spacecraft coming to collect us. The vast majority of humanity is geared for survival rather than self-destruction, suicide accounts for no more than 2 percent of deaths in the US, and maybe as low as 1 percent.¹ Collective suicide or suicide pacts are even less common.

What then brings a group of people from the world of conventional reality to a community that believes firmly in a leader who brings them, with their full awareness, to collective self-destruction? The Heaven's Gate group is particularly interesting for several reasons. The action of its 39 members was undoubtedly and unequivocally suicide. At Jonestown, there were armed guards who were ready to shoot any follower who did not comply with Jim Jones' instructions to drink the poison. At Waco, it still remains unclear who started the fire that burned down the Cult Davidians' compound. While members of the Solar Temple may have agreed to their ritual communal death, it is not possible to shoot oneself several times in the head, as appears to have happened to some of the members.

Why did they do it? There was no external threat to the group, unlike the situation encountered by Jim Jones' Peoples Temple and David Koresh's Cult Davidians at Waco. There was no coercion: members were free to leave, and there were no equally unpalatable alternatives to imbibing poison. There was no evidence of mental illness, financial problems, disappointment, or factors that are typically associated with suicide. Much of the problem in

explaining Heaven's Gate is that such phenomena are so rare. When a type of mass death is frequent, for example with air crashes, it is possible to identify common accompanying factors and assess their role in the calamity.

The rarity of an occurrence is proportional to our difficulty in explaining it. The majority of attempts to explain the 'suicide cults' have tended to look at them piecemeal or as a small group ('the big five'), rather than widen the sample to include other forms of suicide, including suicides committed outside a religious context, and particularly suicide pacts. The field of suicidology — the scientific study of suicide — may therefore help to throw light on the Heaven's Gate phenomenon. It is perhaps surprising that those of us who study new religious groups have paid little attention to suicidology. This is no doubt due to the relatively low profile of the subject, as well as the presumption, particularly championed by the anti-cult movement, that there is something about the religion — 'the cult' — that has occasioned such a disaster, such as 'brainwashing' or 'mind control'. In what follows, I shall examine some of the factors involved in suicide, as identified by suicidologists, and discuss how these relate to the somewhat more familiar topic of charismatic leadership.

The case against suicide

The vast majority of individuals and religious groups do not end their existence with suicide, for a number of compelling reasons. Even the most world-renouncing religious organisations believe that life has some purpose, even if it is to demonstrate that the believer can overcome the world and its carnal temptations. Life for most people, and for most followers of religion, is good — or at least good enough for death not to seem the preferable alternative.

Individuals with problems more typically seek non-suicidal solutions, and the health and caring professionals who deal with people's physical and mental problems do not typically suggest suicide as a remedy. Doctors are bound by the Hippocratic Oath to preserve life, and

psychiatrists and counsellors base their solutions on enabling their clients to cope with living, rather than to opt for dying. Doctors such as Jack Kevorkian, who have encouraged the practice of assisted suicide, have proved enormously controversial, and assisted suicide and voluntary euthanasia remain illegal in the vast majority of countries.

No priest or minister of religion would recommend suicide. Although religions typically teach that there is something radically wrong with the human condition, religious solutions include repentance, and spiritual exercises such as prayer, study or penance. Suicide is traditionally perceived as being contrary to the teachings of the vast majority of religions: ‘You shall not kill’ is a fundamental commandment, and although there are exceptions where taking another person’s life is justified (such as war or self-defence), the prohibition on the taking of life is normally taken to proscribe suicide. Suicide is typically regarded as an act that might result in divine punishment or, in the case of eastern religions, incurring bad karma that would require considerable expiation. Life and death are generally regarded as being in God’s hands, and the Christian tradition has considered suicide as an act of *hubris* — an outrageous act in which the perpetrator usurps the role to which only God is entitled. Suicide has therefore been stigmatised, to the extent that for a large part of its history the Church denied a proper Christian burial to the suicide victim. At a more mundane level, the suicide victim can be construed as committing a selfish act: taking one’s own life may appear to be the solution to grave personal problems, but what the subsequent effect on bereaved family and friends?

Added to all these considerations, there is no agreed answer to the question of what, if anything, lies beyond death. If death affords no more than endless oblivion, that hardly seems a desirable prospect. If it is some heavenly paradise, there may correspondingly be a hell or a purgatory, which is much less desirable. Alternatively one may expect numerous subsequent births and rebirths in the round of *samsara*, in which suicide will greatly delay one’s passage

to *nirvana* or *moksha*. Although religious believers may claim certainty about life after death, the certainties pertaining to the world's different religions are competing certainties. Too many certainties therefore amount to uncertainty.

In his *Violence and New Religious Movements* James R. Lewis writes about 'The Big Five', as he calls those religious groups that gave rise to media reports of mass deaths in recent times (Lewis, 2011:93). These are Jonestown (1978: 919 dead), the Branch Davidians of Waco (1993: 93 dead), the Order of the Solar Temple (1994 and 1995: 53 dead), Aum Shinrikyo (1995: 12 killed), and Heaven's Gate (1997: 39 dead). To these five one ought to add a sixth: The Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God (Uganda 2000), in which 500 members were burned alive, and other mass graves were subsequently found containing over 1,000 corpses. Whether these organizations should be grouped together is debateable: Unlike the others, Aum Shinrikyo members did not kill themselves, but members of the public. As for Heaven's Gate, it was not a particularly 'big' group, numbering only around 200 in its heyday, and having just over forty members at the time of the mass death. It was also not particularly violent, unless one interprets violence in a very broad sense to incorporate ending one's life in an unnatural way. Although the group possessed a few firearms, they probably had fewer per person than the average American, and they were never used. Even the form of the death that members used was non-violent: it was peaceful and painless.

Even if we allow that these groups might be classified together — excluding AUM, which was not a suicide group — we are left with a sample of five groups (including the Ugandan Ten Commandments group). This is a very small sample from which to draw conclusions about the circumstances giving rise to the collective deaths, and it is doubtful whether it would have any scientific validity. One might try adding other religious mass suicides in the course of human history, but the only one of which there is substantive

evidence is the Jewish community of Masada in 73 C.E., when around 960 inhabitants took their own lives in preference to surrendering to the Roman invaders.

The Heaven's Gate community

In order to discuss the possible reasons for the Heaven's Gate suicides, some basic information may be appropriate. Heaven's Gate falls into the category of UFO-religions. It was previously known under various names: the Anonymous Sexaholics Celibate Church, Human Individual Metamorphosis (HIM), Total Overcomers, and Total Overcomers Anonymous. Its ideas were based on a combination of UFOlogy and the somewhat idiosyncratic biblical exegesis of founder-leaders Bonnie Nettles (1927-1985) and Marshall Herff Applewhite (1931-1997). Convinced that they were the Two Witnesses mentioned in the Book of Revelation, Nettles and Applewhite organised a series of seminars in 1975 in various US states and in Canada, in which they taught that they had come from The Next Evolutionary Level Above Human (TELAH), and could enable followers to make a transition to this level. The Two gave themselves nicknames involving matching pairs, such as Guinea and Pig, Bo and Peep, and finally Ti and Do (pronounced 'doe'). Those who wished to follow them were asked to abandon their conventional lifestyle, and to come with them, living a somewhat nomadic lifestyle. Later in 1975 Nettles and Applewhite divided the group into 'cells' — small groups that became dispersed into various parts of the country. Each member was assigned a 'check partner' — a member of the opposite sex, but with whom any physical relationship was disallowed, but who served to ensure that the other member was adhering to the rules. Followers were given new names, ending in the letters 'ODY', with the prefix usually spelt in an abbreviated form (for example JSTody for Justody). This lifestyle was austere: personal adornments were prohibited, and contacts with the outside world had to be abandoned. Even watching television and reading newspapers was disallowed. Around half

of the group felt unable this way of life, and left. Meanwhile, The Two disappeared from public view. Ti and Do reappeared the following year, and summoned their members to a remote camp in Wyoming, where they reconstituted the group into ‘star clusters’ — small groups, but this time kept physically together.

In 1985 Bonnie Nettles died of cancer. Applewhite continued to lead the group on his own, teaching that Nettles had left her body to aspire to the Next Level. Soon afterwards the group acquired a large amount of money — the exact circumstances are unknown — which enabled them to live in more permanent premises. In 1996 they rented the large 3.1-acre ranch at Santa Fe on the outskirts of San Diego, where they were able to run their Higher Source business, which consisted largely of designing web sites. The Internet had newly become publicly accessible at that time.

The group’s doctrines underwent some development over time, but their central tenets were that there exist two races beyond the human realm: those inhabiting The Next Evolutionary Level Above Human (TELAH), and the Luciferians — malevolent adversarial space races who try to secure human allegiance. Members of TELAH occasionally visit the earth. They last did so two thousand years ago with the coming of Jesus, and now, two millennia later, they sent another ‘away team’ to earth in the form of Nettles (often referred to as ‘the Older Member’) and Applewhite. Their message was that the earth was approaching the end of its 6,000-year life, and was irrevocably suffering from pollution and lack of physical resources. It was about to be ‘spaded under’. The Two’s mission was to collect up a number of ‘tagged individuals’ — people who had been specially chosen to arrive at the Next Level before this planetary catastrophe occurred. When the Hale Bopp comet appeared in 1997, it was regarded as a portent: the group believed that there was another object behind it, possibly a spaceship containing members of the Next Level. This was the signal that the members were now to leave their bodies and to join Ti’s crew at TELAH.

Reasons for suicide

The sociologist Émile Durkheim (1897) was one of the first to write academically about suicide and to speculate about its causes. Durkheim claimed to identify four categories of suicide. First, there are egoistic suicides, committed by those who lack social integration, not being able to fit into a cohesive group. Second, altruistic suicides are enacted for a supposedly worthy cause, for example by martyrs, soldiers, and suicide bombers. Third, anomic suicides take place in situations where the status quo to which one has been accustomed is disrupted: for example in times of economic depression. Fourth, there are fatalistic suicides, by those who have become excessively rule-governed, for example in prison.

These early attempts to identify the causes of suicide have been reappraised, particularly in the light of empirical and statistical evidence. Recent evidence suggest that suicide is most common among elderly people, more common in men than in women, and particularly associated with mental illness, especially affective disorders such as severe depression, misuse of alcohol and drugs, and schizophrenia, especially where the patient does not take the prescribed medication. Psychological crises can trigger suicide, for example bereavement, break-ups of personal relationships, or discovery that one has a terminal illness or a malady that does not appear to respond to medical treatment. A family history of suicide also has a bearing on an individual's risk, and there is some evidence that events affecting an entire population, such as an earthquake, result in an increase in the number of suicides. Sexual orientation may have some relevance: homosexual and bisexual individuals are more prone to attempted suicide, although it has not been established whether they contribute to completed suicides. Possessing the means to committing suicide — for example, owning a firearm — is, unsurprisingly, a contributory factor. There are cultural variations, the highest

suicide rates being found in Eastern Europe, and the lowest in Egypt and Iran, with the US slightly below the world average per capita (Hawton and van Heeringen, 2009; Maris et al, 2006: 6-25).

To what extent do these data on suicide shed light on the demise of the Heaven's Gate group? If anything, they make the group's demise more puzzling rather than less. The group was drawn from no particular age range; although roughly half were between 41 and 50 at the time of death, the youngest member was 26, and the oldest 72. Only five were over 60, and Applewhite himself was hardly elderly, being 65 at the time. There was, atypically, a slight preponderance of female members: 21 women died, compared with 18 men. The group as a whole does not appear to be composed of psychologically disturbed individuals, unless of course one assumes that anyone who commits suicide in this way must be mentally ill — but that would be to beg the question. Members were not allowed to consume alcohol or drugs; hence these major factors affecting suicide were not present. Separating themselves from the world, and disallowing emotional ties ensured that the group did not suffer from the distresses involved in everyday living, such as family quarrels and divorces. The group did not appear to have had financial problems: in the late 1980s Applewhite acquired a large sum of money, and he was sufficiently affluent for the group to rent the Santa Fe ranch, reportedly at 7,000 US dollars a month (Hutchison, 2011). The group's Higher Source company appears to have been successful, and Rio DiAngelo (a surviving member who did not take part in the suicides) reports that, while the group was on the road, they were invariably successful in finding adequate accommodation and employment. Although Nettles' death had a bearing on the suicide, it was not recent, having occurred twelve years previously. The only corresponding feature between the Heaven's Gate deaths and the above profile of suicide victims lies in sexuality: Applewhite was gay, and members' appearance has been described as androgynous. Whatever the sexual orientation of the group members in general, they seem

to have found problems with their sexual desires, to the extent that a few of them, including Applewhite, underwent castration.

Suicide pacts

Thus far I have considered individual suicides. However, there is another phenomenon that is somewhat closer to the Heaven's Gate demise: the suicide pact. Suicide pacts are rare, accounting for less than 1 percent of all suicides (Rajagopal, 2004). In a recent article in the *British Medical Journal* Sundararagan Rajagopal identifies a number of salient features. Those who enter into the pact usually have a close relationship with each other, such as siblings or close friends, although in recent times media attention has been given to the cybersuicide: agreements between online 'friends'. There is charismatic leadership: one partner to the agreement is usually the dominant one, who persuades the other, who may not have been willing without being led. There are strong loyalties between those who agree, and sometimes the agreement is influenced by religious belief. Suicide notes are jointly signed. Usually a specific event triggers the joint suicide, particularly some threat to their relationship's continued existence, such as terminal illness or the separation of lovers. Around half of those involved in a suicide pact suffer from some form of mental illness, and a third have some physical malady. Rajagopal also mentions the phenomenon of *folie à deux* — a situation where two individuals encourage each other progressively into increasingly deviant forms of behaviour.

The most common method of ending one's life which is favoured by those who enter into a suicide pact is the use of poison. There are no doubt several reasons for this. Taking poison is a quiet and unobtrusive method of death. It can be taken in the privacy of one's bedroom and, unlike death by firearms, it makes no noise. The body awaits discovery at a later time and since the deed is carried out in private, no one is present who can attempt to

stop the event. Provided one has correctly ascertained the amount needed for a fatal dose, the method is reliable.

Much of this, although obviously not all, relates to Heaven's Gate. There was the charismatic leader who instigated the suicides, the relationship to the group's religious beliefs, strong loyalties among members, the use of poison, the private execution of the event, allowing the bodies to be discovered later. The collective signing of suicide notes was done in a more technologically advanced way, the group explaining their action communally by recording and collating their farewell videos. One should of course be wary of forcing the Heaven's Gate group into Rajagopal's model. There are clear dissimilarities, such as the lack of evidence of significant physical or mental illness among the members, and the absence of a trigger that threatened the group's continued existence.

Some of these features of the suicide pact are worth singling out for comment. The use of poison is significant in a variety of ways. There is commensality in imbibing a substance as the same lethal 'food'. At Jonestown and Heaven's Gate the members were simultaneously present, and hence the fatal meal took on a quasi-sacramental character. Particularly in the case of Heaven's Gate, it was more than a suicide pact: it was a rite of passage, intended to take the earth-bound members to a higher level of existence.

The notion of the *folie à deux* is also important, as Marc Galanter has noted. During Nettles' lifetime, the two leaders became convinced of their role as the Book of Revelation's Two Witnesses — a conviction that became heightened after Nettles' death. Scholars of religion are reluctant to talk about delusional belief, unlike the media, who liberally employed terms like 'bizarre' and 'wacky' to describe the group. Heaven's Gate's teachings certainly ran counter to those accepted by the vast majority of US citizens but, in common with many NRMs, they had an inner logic, which was linked to a cultural milieu of believe in extraterrestrials and UFOs. In 1997 CNN and *Time Magazine* published the results of a

survey about belief in such matters, which revealed that 75 percent of those surveyed believe that a UFO crashed at Roswell in 1947, 64 percent believed that aliens have contacted humans, 50 percent that they have abducted some of them, and that 80 percent believed that the government was hiding information about extraterrestrials. (Alberta UFO Study Group, 2012). Heaven's Gate's ideas touched down firmly on some of the beliefs of US popular culture.

If Heaven's Gate began as *folie à deux*, the belief in the Two Witnesses expanded well beyond the couple. Nettles' posthumous role is important. Christopher Partridge points out that Nettles' death in 1985 was an important factor. It did more than give rise to bereavement. Although bereavement, as previously mentioned, is sometimes a factor influencing a suicide, it is unlikely that Applewhite would have waited twelve years before taking his life. Yet there is no doubt that Nettles was constantly in his memory, as is witnessed by an empty white chair which was always beside him during his talks. Nettles was believed to have a continued presence, in some spiritual sense. Nettles' death, however, created cognitive dissonance in the Heaven's Gate worldview. The two leaders had been teaching that the group would be collected physically by a spacecraft, but Nettles' spirit had departed, leaving her body behind. From around this point, there appears to have been a doctrinal shift: instead of accepting a physical rapture by TELA members, Nettles was regarded as the first of the group to have reached this level, and TELA was not to be entered physically, but by abandoning the body, to be issued with a new 'suit of clothes' after the transition.

Persuasiveness and charismatic leadership

Inevitably when some scandal or disaster occurs involving an NRM, the media, the anti-cult movement and the public turn to 'brainwashing' as an explanation. Many of the comments on YouTube clips of Applewhite's lectures refer to his staring eyes, as if he was

capable of mesmerising his audience into compliance. It is not appropriate here to go into the well-trodden brainwashing debate. It is sufficient to say that the vast majority of academic writers have ably demonstrated that the 'brainwashing' theory is not at all a satisfactory way of explaining what happens in Heaven's Gate or in other NRMs. More promising are theories relating to charismatic leadership.

The persuasiveness of a charismatic leader does not mean that his followers will do absolutely anything he wants.² As Bromley notes, charisma is something that is, so to speak, negotiated between the leader and the disciple. The vast majority of people who came to hear Nettles and Applewhite did not find them persuasive, and hence decided not to follow them. There is therefore a self-selection affecting a charismatic leader's sphere of influence. His following will only include those who are willing, at least at the outset, to accept his agenda. However, this still does not mean that even the self-selected supportive disciples will give the total obedience that is frequently associated with NRM leaders. On the contrary, as I have noted, there was a very high attrition rate in Heaven's Gate, and the expected lifestyle of nomadic existence and separation militated against building up a sizeable group of supporters. For those who decided to continue, it is understandable that, as familiarity and trust grew between the leader and the disciples, the more compliant the latter would be. It also becomes increasingly difficult to disengage from a group in which one has invested a substantial proportion of one's life. Compliance is therefore to some degree the result of the follower considering what the options are. Disengagement can be hard, even for a member of a conventional religious group, but where commitment is full time and one has given up all one's earthly possessions to follow the charismatic leader, the prospect of shaping a new life outside the NRM can be a daunting, and sometimes even an impossible one. Such factors are the ones that contribute towards conformity and obedience, rather than the leader's 'mind control' on the leader's part.

Increasing difficulty in disengagement allows the charismatic leader to make heightened demands and claims upon the follower. By 1997 the group was thoroughly convinced by Applewhite's claim to be superhuman, even the embodied return of Jesus himself. The theme of suicide appears to have been introduced gradually and cautiously. DiAngelo reports that Applewhite first raised the topic with the group by telling them how, in his previous life as Jesus, he returned from East Asia to Judaea in the full knowledge that he was going to be killed. Do explained that he acted in this seemingly irrational way because he knew that the time had come for him to return to his Father. Jesus, he recounted, left his body so that his soul could travel back to the Next Level. DiAngelo records that Do went to ask, 'What if we had to exist our vehicles by our own choice? Did we have a problem with that?' (DiAngelo: 48). The matter was discussed, and Do asked everyone to write him a confidential note, expressing how they felt about this proposal. These notes were not even to be read by their check partners, but would be read only by him.

However, there are limits to compliance, and different followers will define the boundaries in different ways. Everyone in the group apparently accepted Applewhite's proposal, except one. DiAngelo recounts the incident:

There was one student that didn't like the idea. His name was SEKODY (Seeker). He was a preacher's son. In fact, he voiced his opinion right there, before we wrote the note. he said, "Are you talking about suicide? If so, look, I've had no problem with everything so far, in fact it has been the most extraordinary time of my life, and you (DO) are obviously the second coming, but suicide is something that I'm not interested in at all." He went to pack his bag and left that night. (DiAngelo: 48).

DiAngelo goes on to report how the group decided on its chosen method of suicide. The important consideration was to leave one's body, and Applewhite wanted this to be done as painlessly as possible. DiAngelo recounts us that they purchased *Final Exit*, a book by Derek Humphry, an advocate of voluntary euthanasia, and founder of the Hemlock Society in the US. One of Humphry's recommendations is:

Decide which day and at what time you intend to die, and let those know who have agreed to be with you. Have your farewell note and other documents . . . beside you. . . When an hour has elapsed, take about ten of your chosen tablets or capsules with as large a drink of spirits or wine as you are comfortable with. Vodka is extremely effective . . . Have the remaining drugs already mixed into a pudding, yogurt, or jam/preserves (whatever pleases you) and swallow all this down as fast as possible. (Humphry; 2010: 154-155).

On the previous page, Humphry specifically suggests applesauce as an appropriate 'pudding', which was the substance used by the group.

Charismatic leadership

Some observations can be made about Heaven's Gate in the light of these scientific studies of suicide. As I have argued, the group does not fit in well with explanations of individual suicide. However, studies of suicide pacts appear to shed more light on the 1997 suicides, being characterised by a charismatic leader, strong loyalties, religious belief, and the phenomenon of *folie à deux*. If we want to explain Heaven's Gate we therefore need to examine how charismatic leaders attract and sustain group loyalties.

Charisma is not to be explained wholly as an innate characteristic of the leader, but is something that is negotiated between the leader and group. In an article on the topic, David G. Bromley identifies a number of features associated with charismatic leaders in NRMs. First, he contends, there must be a pool of potential followers to draw on, they must be searching for some alternative set of symbolic or social pathways, and the leader must offer some formula for salvation that resonates with their existential needs. The leader typically claims some special connection with a sacred power, sometimes coupled with mythic narratives about his own person or some transformative moment that marked him out as an enlightened or superhuman individual. The use of a special spiritual name is not uncommon, and sometimes spiritual names are given to followers. A change of physical appearance is sometimes adopted. The leader maintains distance from the group, underscoring his presumed higher spiritual status, and precluding criticism or discussion. He makes high personal demands of followers, directly challenging the status quo, and sometimes providing tests of their loyalty, such as periodically relocating the group. Those who maintain their loyalty become the 'faithful remnant' that the leader has gathered.

Much of this sounds familiar in the context of the Heaven's Gate group. As previously mentioned, Nettles and Applewhite drew their following from the US counterculture, particularly those who were interested in UFOs. Professedly, Applewhite and Nettles were special: they had come from the Next Level Above Human. They offer a spiritual path, and demands are high: followers were to give up everything; there was no room for part-time or home membership. There was a high goal: followers could escape from the world's irretrievable crisis by reaching TELAH. Spiritual names were used, and members adopted special dress. From the group's early origins Nettles and Applewhite made it clear that discussion was inappropriate. Advertisements for the 1970s lectures stated, 'NOT a discussion of UFO sightings or phenomena,' adding that "'The Two' will discuss how the

transition from the human level to the next level is accomplished' (cited in Chryssides 2011: 186). Applewhite made statements like:

I'll tell you who I am. As to whether or not you believe who I am is up to you.
And whether or not you believe that this civilization is going to be recycled or refurbished is up to you. (Applewhite 1996).

Applewhite's purpose was not to debate, but to warn.

The 'faithful remnant', as Bromley describes the followers, was a small minority. The first group were those who went 'on the road' with the Two (200 at the group's zenith), and an even smaller 'remnant' returned when The Two reconstituted the group in 1976, having dispersed them in 'cells'. Applewhite commonly spoke of those who did not give up as the ones who 'pursue'. The faithful were not only special because of their perseverance and loyalty. They were 'human plants' with 'deposits' inserted from the Next Level, 'tagged individuals', specially designated by the members of TELAH to make the journey. (Applewhite 1996).

Rational suicide?

Having examined the features of suicide pacts, there is one important respect in which the members of Heaven's Gate differ from others who enter into such agreements. The group was not embracing death in the belief that it was the better alternative to a predicament of life. True, Applewhite regarded the earth as beyond physical redemption, but many religious groups have similar teachings, yet do not resolve such problems by mass suicide. The promised positive benefits of dying — the transition to the Next Level — seem to have been given greater emphasis than the ills of the present life on earth. Above all, the charismatic

leader must offer his followers something important, and Applewhite literally offered them the kingdom of heaven. The suicides were unusual in that he offered his followers a large benefit through death, rather than death as the lesser of two evils for troubled souls. To quote his own words:

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.

Suicidologists remain divided on the question of whether suicide can ever be rational (Mishara, 2012). Applewhite’s teachings, although not compelling to those outside the group, were internally coherent and systematically presented. If shedding one’s body is necessary for the transition to the Next Level, and if Applewhite was the special messenger that he claimed to be, then suicide would seem a rational decision. Applewhite did his followers the two-fold service of explaining the phenomena of extraterrestrials and UFOs — phenomena that continue to puzzle many of us — and explaining Christian scripture.

One further feature of the Heaven’s Group should be mentioned. Despite the differences between the five NRMs that resulted in mass deaths, isolation appears to be a common feature. Not only do members of a group succumb to peer pressure, but isolation from those who hold a conventional worldview ensures that the group’s views are not subjected to external criticism. Most followers of NRMs are ordinary people who lack formal training in the study of religion, and therefore often lack the ability to compare an NRM’s

interpretation of scripture with those of more conventional scholars. Those who subsequently become aware that the group's teachings are against the trend can reassure themselves that they are on the right path, as a result of their loyalty to the charismatic leader. Indeed, the leader can attribute his idiosyncrasy to his superior knowledge over the rest of his peers: only he has successfully found the truth. To those with the touchstone of conventional reality, where preachers and scholars offer a very different interpretation of Christian scripture, and where the vast majority of the population prefer to remain alive, Heaven's Gate might seem 'wacky' and 'bizarre'. To those who belonged, however, Applewhite effectively created the conditions for a suicide pact, offering his followers a rare opportunity to make the transition to the Next Level.

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¹ Different researchers have produced slightly different findings, and it can sometimes be difficult to determine whether or not a death is a suicide.

² I have not used inclusive language to refer to charismatic leaders, since all the leaders of ‘suicide cults’ were male at the time of their group’s death.