



Heaven's Gate

Author: Sarah Harvey

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Introduction

'Heaven's Gate' was a new religious movement, influenced by both Christian and New Age traditions, active in the United States of America from the early 1970s until 1997 when thirty-nine members died by suicide, or "exited their vehicles" in their own terminology (see, for example, the group's 'Exit Videos'). The term 'Heaven's Gate' was only used at the end of the movement's life, but as the name of their website and their anthology of teachings it remains connected to the movement to the present day. The group was known by various other names over its lifetime, including 'Human Individual Metamorphosis' (the name of its central teaching or 'process' for a time) and 'Total Overcomers Anonymous.' Members referred to the group most often simply as 'the Class' and to themselves as 'students.' However, the term 'Heaven's Gate' is used in this article.

Heaven's Gate was founded by Bonnie Lu Nettles (1927–1985) and Marshall Herff Applewhite (1931–1997), known at different times as Bo and Peep, Ti and Do, or the Two. They taught that the Kingdom of Heaven, which they called 'the Next Level' or 'the Evolutionary Level Above Human,' was a physical place that existed in the universe and could be entered on a spaceship. The prerequisite of entry was a transformation of the individual self into a perfect, genderless, extraterrestrial being. There was an emphasis on transcending one's humanness, and human traits were seen as obstacles on a spiritual path. However, the nature of this transformation altered over time as the movement's teachings developed. Initially, it was taught that the human body could be physically and chemically transformed; later, it was taught that the human body was simply a vehicle or "suit of clothes" (Applewhite 1997) for the residing soul, and it would need to be exited in order to reach the Next Level and receive a new, extraterrestrial body. In this context, the suicides were a logical conclusion within the members' worldview, where they were not considered suicides at all but rather a 'graduation.' Remaining on Earth was suicide in their view.

This article charts the developments in the beliefs of the adherents of Heaven's Gate, leading to the movement's 1997 demise, and considers its eschatology and use of apocalyptic language. It ends with a discussion of sources and critical scholarly debates. It notes the importance of the archived Heaven's Gate website and the few scholarly accounts of the movement, most notably the work of Robert W. Balch and David Taylor (2002), and Benjamin E. Zeller (2014).

History of the Movement

The origins of Heaven's Gate lie in the meeting of Bonnie Lu Nettles and Marshall Herff Applewhite in 1972 (see the section entitled Founders, below, for biographies). Nettles and Applewhite reported an immediate spiritual connection and, soon after meeting, left their families and lives behind to travel together on something of a spiritual quest. They spent approximately three years travelling, staying in various campsites, opening two New Age centres (Christian Arts Center and Know Place), and gaining one follower. In 1974, Applewhite spent six months in prison on charges of car theft. During these years, Nettles and Applewhite formulated their religious teachings and declared themselves to be the two witnesses of Revelation 11, hence the title of 'the Two' that members of Heaven's Gate used for Nettles and Applewhite.

In 1975, they began to hold public meetings to spread their teachings. Following one meeting in April 1975, they gained around twenty-five members who had all been followers of a metaphysical teacher called Clarence Klug. This marked the start of Heaven's Gate as an organised religious movement with members. In September 1975, at a meeting in Waldport, Oregon, some thirty people joined and 'disappeared' into the movement, leading to a great deal of negative media coverage. The movement had around 200 members by the end of 1975; however, this was the height of its popularity and membership numbers fell throughout the group's history. Towards the end of 1975, the Two went into hiding because of the media coverage. They had no direct contact with members who they had previously organised into small groups and partnerships. Members, maintaining these small groups, spent their time travelling to various campsites and holding public meetings, following the example previously set by the Two. Whilst the Two returned to their members in 1976, forming a single community for the first time, they now rejected public meetings and attempts to proselytize; Nettles declared that the "harvest is closed." (Applewhite 1988). These activities did not resume again until the early 1990s.

Nettles's death from liver cancer in 1985 was the primary catalyst for the transformation of the movement's teachings. As will be described in the "Beliefs" section below, Applewhite subsequently taught that one could enter the Next Level without a physical body, that Nettles had returned to her extraterrestrial body in the Next Level, and that he was still in contact with Nettles through a "chain of mind" in which she was his "older member" (his teacher and connection in the Next Level) (Balch and Taylor 2002: 214; Zeller 2014: 98).

The early 1990s marked a period of renewed public engagement for the group. In 1991-1992, they released a series of twelve, one-hour-long videos, *Beyond Human: The Last Call*, in which Applewhite and other members explained their teachings. In 1993, they placed an advert in *USA Today*, entitled "[UFO Cult Resurfaces with Final Offer](#)," and sent similar materials into various other regional newspapers. These adverts were apocalyptic in tone, warning readers that Earth was about to be "spaded under" (Applewhite 1993) and this was their last chance to be saved. In 1994, public meetings were resumed. However, according to Zeller (2014), the failure of these and subsequent public engagement efforts, primarily through the internet, in 1995 and 1996 (when they were either ridiculed or simply ignored) ultimately contributed to the members' final decision to 'exit' their bodies.

Zeller (2014, 179) notes that Applewhite introduced the possibility of suicide to members at a meeting in September 1994. Initially, Applewhite thought that the US government would lay siege to the movement

as had happened at Ruby Ridge in 1992 and Waco in 1993. Applewhite discussed with members the necessity of their deaths at the hands of the government and members bought firearms to prepare for this outcome. However, as this became increasingly unlikely given that the group was not subject to persecution or even much media coverage at this point, other means of mass exit were considered. Influenced by Derek Humphrey's 1991 book, *Final Exit: The Practicalities of Self-Deliverance and Assisted Suicide for the Dying*, Applewhite decided on self-poisoning. He and the other members consumed a mix of barbiturates, alcohol, and apple sauce before placing plastic bags over their heads. The deaths took place in three waves on 22 and 23 March 1997. These dates were selected as the time when the Hale-Bopp comet was closest to Earth. Applewhite and his members had come to believe that the comet was a sign from the Next Level and there was reportedly an unidentified object trailing behind it which could be a spaceship piloted by the Next Level. The Red Alert posted on their website states, "Hale-Bopp Brings Closure to Heaven's Gate," a message which remains on the homepage of heavensgate.com.

Unsurprisingly, there was a great deal of media coverage of the discovery of thirty-nine bodies in a rented house in Santa Fe. Members were wearing a uniform emblazoned with a "Heaven's Gate Away Team" patch and new trainers, and they each had a packed bag by the side of the bed and the same amount of spare change. Three other members, who had not been with the group at the time, later died by suicide. Other members, who had left the group but remained sympathetic, continue to maintain the group's website at the time of writing this article.

Geographical, Political, and Social Context

In one of the few monographs about Heaven's Gate, Zeller (2014) describes Heaven's Gate as a quintessentially American religion. He argues that "Heaven's Gate reflected, responded to and sewed together various strands of American religious thought and practice" (Zeller 2014, 2). In this sense, it was a religion tied to place and time: it drew on certain sectors of religious and popular culture circulating in 1970s–1990s American culture and thus was "American culture writ small" (Zeller 2014, 2).

The religious beliefs and traditions which comprised Heaven's Gate will be covered in more depth below but it can be noted here that the movement was most strongly influenced by American Evangelical Christianity, especially premillennial dispensationalism, and the New Age movement of the 1970s–1990s which itself drew on earlier metaphysical traditions, including Theosophy. Added to this mix was a strong strand of Ufology and conspiratorial thinking, and influence from popular science fiction books, films, and television shows, most notably *Star Trek* and *The X Files*. For a movement that sought to cut all ties to the human world, it was nevertheless strongly influenced by these forms of popular culture, by certain political events (such as the government sieges of Ruby Ridge and Waco), and by developments in science and technology. With regard to the latter, two developments were of particular importance: the rise of the internet, which allowed members to post messages to discussion forums and enabled Heaven's Gate to be one of the first new religious movements to create a website; and the discovery of the Hale-Bopp comet which ultimately contributed to the movement's end. Whilst the group itself was not political, it saw a kinship in anti-establishment movements, seeing both Christian nationalists and members of other 'cults' as kindred souls and as possibly receptive to the Heaven's Gate message.

Founders, Leaders, Membership

Heaven's Gate was founded by Bonnie Lu Nettles and Marshall Herff Applewhite. Both were born in Texas—Nettles in the 1920s and Applewhite in the 1930s—but each had different religious upbringings and interests. Nettles was raised as a Baptist but as an adult joined the Theosophical Society. She also had an interest in astrology and channelling, and claimed to receive messages from the spirit world through a "Brother Francis." Applewhite, on the other hand, was the son of a Presbyterian minister and had himself trained for the ministry for a time before giving it up to study music. He also had an emerging interest in the New Age and reportedly heard voices (which some scholars, such as Raine [2005], suggest was evidence of schizophrenia).

At the time of their meeting in 1972, Nettles was working as a nurse, caring for her four children, and in the process of separating from her husband. Applewhite had recently been dismissed from the University of St Thomas, Texas, where he had been an Assistant Professor in music. His dismissal followed a failed affair with a male student. Applewhite was bisexual. He had married and had two children but divorced in the early 1960s and remained estranged from his wife and children for the rest of his life. Following the divorce, he had a number of relationships with men and women but, in his own accounts, struggled to make a long-lasting, intimate connection with anyone (Balch and Taylor 2002: 210). Abstention from sex was a key teaching of the group. Whilst some scholars (e.g., Raine [2005]) have argued that it was a struggle with homosexuality that led to the importance of abstention, others (e.g., Zeller [2014]) suggest it was a failure in his relationships more generally.

Nettles and Applewhite remained as the leaders of the movement—Nettles until her death in 1985, Applewhite until the end of the movement in 1997. Even after Nettles's death, however, she was very much present in the movement as Applewhite's "older member," and Applewhite claimed to remain in communication with her (Zeller 2014: 98).

Nettles and Applewhite are frequently described as charismatic leaders in the academic literature (although others critique the notion of charisma, see Chryssides 2021). Certainly, there was a charismatic bond between the leaders and members and, after 1976, members could only access the Next Level through Nettles and Applewhite and their teachings. They were also considered by members to be messianic figures: Applewhite was believed to be the second coming of Jesus Christ and Nettles was God the Father (see Balch 1982). However, Balch (1982) and others (such as Lewis [2003]) have challenged the idea that charismatic leadership played the only role in individuals joining (as opposed to remaining in) the movement. In 1975–1976 when the majority of people joined, including twenty-eight of those who died in 1997, recruits saw the Two speak at a public lecture before having a meeting with them the following day in which they committed to the movement (Balch and Taylor 2002: 212). They then did not see the Two again whilst Nettles and Applewhite went into hiding. Many of those who committed did so on the basis of the teachings alone rather than on affective bonds with the leaders or other members. Consequently, it is difficult to regard a charismatic connection as the key factor in inducing people to join the movement. However, for those who remained in the movement, affective bonds certainly developed; members had a close relationship with Applewhite, which some described as akin to a parent-child relationship, although members also entered into a marriage with Applewhite after Nettles's death.

Neither was it the case that it was very difficult to leave the movement; indeed, people did leave

throughout its history. Membership at its height was 200 individuals in 1975, but dropped to 100 in 1976 as the teachings and lifestyle became more restrictive and disciplined. Those who left at this time had seen their participation as a step on their individual, multifaceted, spiritual journey, and not something that they had necessarily been committed to long-term, which ties in with New Age ideology. By 1978, membership had dropped to forty-eight; by 1993, numbers had fallen to twenty-six (Balch and Taylor 2002). These were termed “prunings” by the group as Nettles and Applewhite only wanted the most committed members to remain; they gave those who left a small amount of money to help them resettle (Balch and Taylor 2002). It was also possible to re-enter the group after leaving; the proselytization efforts of 1994–1996 were partly focused on previous members of the group and a few did rejoin. Despite the strong boundaries of the group and its cutting off from society and all things human, individuals did move in and out of the group over time.

Zeller (2014), following Balch and Taylor (1976), has described those who joined Heaven’s Gate as “spiritual seekers.” (2014: 43). Despite differences in age, gender, and socioeconomic status, members were united by a spiritual quest in which most had previous involvement in the New Age movement. They found their answers in Heaven’s Gate. It is important to note that members were involved in the construction of the group’s worldview. Whilst Nettles and Applewhite were the source of the teachings and their rules were to be followed, members contributed to the public dissemination of teachings in meetings, online, and in texts and videos. All but four of them recorded ‘Exit Videos’ in which they outlined their reasons for “exiting their vehicles” in 1997.

Beliefs

In terms of their beliefs, Heaven’s Gate primarily straddled two worlds: Evangelical Christianity and the New Age movement (including antecedent esoteric traditions such as Theosophy, and related movements such as Ufology). There is debate amongst scholars as to whether Heaven’s Gate should be considered a predominantly Christian religion with New Age influences or a predominantly New Age religion with Christian influences. Zeller argues for the former, stating that Heaven’s Gate “was Christian, but read through a New Age lens” (Zeller 2014, 71). He has coined the phrase “extraterrestrial Biblical hermeneutics” (Zeller 2010, 2014) to describe the ways in which Nettles and Applewhite interpreted parts of the Bible as an account of extraterrestrial visitation. Central to their interpretation was both the existence of extraterrestrial life (God and Jesus are extraterrestrials located in heaven/the Next Level/the Evolutionary Level Above Human) and the belief that extraterrestrial life enters “into a relationship with humanity” and helps individuals self-develop (Zeller 2010, 37). Alongside this, Nettles and Applewhite held a material reading of the Bible in which abstract notions became material realities, most notably that heaven physically existed in the universe, that it could be reached on a spacecraft, and that spiritual beings were extraterrestrials. These ideas bear similarity to what is now termed ‘ancient astronaut theory’ and Nettles and Applewhite were undoubtedly influenced by these ideas circulating in popular culture (such as in the works of Erich von Daniken 1968, 1970).

Many of the beliefs and practices of Heaven’s Gate were concerned with how to reach the Next Level and thus with individual transformation and salvation. In the period 1975–1985, the Two taught that the Next Level could be reached through a physical, mental, and chemical transformation of the existing human body into an extraterrestrial one. Likened to a caterpillar metamorphosing into a butterfly, the Two

taught a 'process' they referred to as 'Human Individual Metamorphosis' which involved a radical change of life and certain body disciplines (see section entitled Practices, below). Key to the transformation was a rejection of wider human social life. Members cut off completely from their previous lives and dedicated themselves to the Class, rejecting their families and any future intimate or sexual relationships, as well as most forms of recreation and indulgences, such as alcohol or drugs. Salvation was the transformation of an individual into an immortal and genderless extraterrestrial being.

The death of Nettles, however, contradicted these teachings. Applewhite had to change them to avoid cognitive dissonance within the group. He began to suggest the necessity of "bodily death before salvation" (Zeller 2006, 85); members would leave their bodies before boarding the spacecraft where they would receive new—rather than transformed—extraterrestrial bodies. Applewhite taught that the human body was in fact just a vessel or vehicle for the soul, and that he and Nettles had entered their human vehicles in the 1970s; when they became Bo and Peep, they were literally no longer Nettles and Applewhite. They were, rather, God and the second incarnation of Jesus Christ.

At the same time, Applewhite introduced the idea of the "chain of mind" (reportedly inspired by the reference to the vine and branches in John 15:5–11), the concept that there was a hierarchical connection to the Next Level. Nettles (the Father or the "older member") was connected or "grafted" to the Next Level in a direct link; Applewhite could only access the Next Level through spiritual communication with Nettles; members could only access the Next Level through Applewhite's teachings (Balch and Taylor 2002: 214; Zeller 2014: 98). . He also introduced the idea of "deposits," the concept that those who could be saved (i.e., the members of Heaven's Gate) already had deposits—which Applewhite likened to a piece of Next Level hardware or a computer chip—within their souls; a teaching akin to predestination, according to Zeller (2014, 121).

Heaven's Gate had a dualistic worldview. Applewhite taught that there were two types of extraterrestrials: those residing in the Next Level who sought to help humanity, and Luciferians or "evil space aliens" who sought to use humanity for their own ends (Applewhite 1996). Luciferians, led by Lucifer/Satan, had been banished to Earth for displeasing the Next Level. A battle between good and evil thus played out on Earth, with humans led astray by Luciferians. Towards the end of the movement, Applewhite became increasingly conspiratorial in his thinking, attributing the evil in the world to Luciferians. This also encouraged 'us-and-them' dichotomies—strong boundaries between members and non-members which were central to the catastrophic millennialism that developed within the movement.

Prophecy, Revelation, Millennialism

Catherine Wessinger has described Heaven's Gate as a fragile millennial group in which members died by suicide to preserve the ultimate concern of the movement: entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven (Wessinger 2000, 229). Suicide was considered necessary because of both the "uncomfortable relationship with mainstream American society" and "internal weaknesses" within the group (Wessinger 2000, 230). Internal weaknesses included the death of Nettles, Applewhite's increasing sense of persecution, and the reliance of members on Applewhite as their sole means of entry into heaven. Zeller disagrees with this analysis somewhat, suggesting that these internal weaknesses were supporting factors in the suicides rather than the cause of them (Zeller 2014, 175). The group had existed in this fragile and unstable state

for the twelve years since Nettles's death. The group's relationship with mainstream society was more significant, Zeller argues, suggesting that the suicides can be attributed to two forms of dualism within the movement: "a metaphysical dualism that distinguished the body from the true self, found in the mind or soul" and a "worldly dualism which distinguished the members of Heaven's Gate and their movement as good, saved, and wholesome, and separated from a bad, damned, and corrupt outside world" (Zeller 2014, 177). These dualisms had been developing since the start of the movement.

The aim of members was the transcendence of both their bodies and Earth in order to reach the Next Level. Over time, the teachings around the state of Earth became more apocalyptic in nature. The [1993 advert placed in USA Today](#) claimed that "The Earth's present 'civilization' is about to be recycled —'spaded under'" as "Its inhabitants are refusing to evolve" and remain under the control of the Luciferians. The advert was the "final offer" for people to choose the path towards the Next Level, following the second incarnation of Jesus Christ. It states that the "Harvest Time," the "Last Days," the "Second Coming" are "finally here!" (Applewhite 1993). When this advert failed to recruit many new members, messaging became even more urgent. For example, in the 1996 videotape message, "[Last Chance to Evacuate Earth Before It's Recycled](#)," Applewhite repeated that Earth was about to be "spaded under," not destroyed but "recycled, refurbished, started over." He deemed this a necessary healing for the planet, but also warned that those who want to be saved must "literally" "get off the planet" by "grafting" onto a member of the Next Level—that is, Applewhite/Jesus (Applewhite 1996).

The origins of these [millennial](#) teachings lie in the [premillennial dispensationalism](#) of American Evangelical Christianity. For a time, Applewhite adopted C. I. Schofield's theology of seven dispensations with a focus on the seventh, future dispensation and the event of the Rapture. But this too was read through the "extraterrestrial Biblical hermeneutics," according to Zeller (2014, 109–11). "Rather than meeting Christ midair" (as was the common teaching, popularised in texts such as Hal Lindsey's 1970 *The Late Great Planet Earth*), "their followers would actually rendezvous with UFOs," one of which would contain Jesus, who would "receive the elect in his company" (Zeller 2014, 111). Dispensationalism was de-emphasised after Nettles's death, however, and "replaced with a more general apocalypticism" (Zeller 2014, 116) and the use of horticultural metaphors: Earth as a garden, the saved as a crop, their souls as seeds, the unsaved as weeds.

The dispensational teachings were closely tied to Nettles and Applewhite's interpretation of Revelation 11. In 1973, Nettles and Applewhite claimed to have received the revelation that they were the two witnesses described in Revelation 11:3–13 (Balch and Taylor 2002: 211). This passage begins, "And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they shall prophesy..." (King James Version). It then describes the witnesses being killed and lying dead in the street for three and a half days (11:9), following which they are resurrected and ascend into heaven in a cloud (11:12). Initially, Nettles and Applewhite focused on what they termed the 'demonstration'—their being killed, lying dead, then resurrecting as extraterrestrials and leaving Earth in a spaceship. They told potential followers that this would happen imminently and would be proof of their message, including of the metamorphic potential of the body (Zeller 2014, 108). Whilst a date for this was never set, it became less of a focus over time, and Applewhite [eventually claimed](#) it had already come to pass, albeit symbolically: "the 'killing in the street' of the two witnesses had occurred at the hands of the media" (Applewhite 1988).

The idea of ascending into heaven in a cloud (Revelation 11:12) remained central, however, and as both George D. Chryssides (2004) and Zeller (2014) note, the cloud was interpreted materially to refer to a

spaceship. This interpretation remained constant across the movement's history. In the late 1970s, members watched the sky every night for signs of spaceships and "Next Level activity" (Balch and Taylor 2002, 216). At some point in this period, the Two even set a date for the arrival of the ship, and the Class spent a night in Texas awaiting pickup (Balch and Taylor 2002, 216). When this did not come to pass, it was interpreted by members as a test.

The group eventually came to believe that the spaceship could be following the Hale-Bopp comet or, at least, that the comet was a sign that it was time to "exit their vehicles." Significantly, 1997 was believed to be 2000 years after the birth of Christ (dated to 4 BCE). In the press release of 22 March 1997, entitled "[Heaven's Gate 'Away Team' Returns to Level Above Human in Distant Space](#)," Applewhite claimed: "We came for the purpose of offering a doorway to the Kingdom of God at the end of this civilization, the end of this age, the end of this millennium" (Applewhite 1997). March 1997 marked the closing of Heaven's Gate in the members' worldview.

Practices

The religious practices of Heaven's Gate included prayer and meditation. Applewhite's lectures, either in person or recorded, took the form of sermons or seminary instruction in the movement. The composition of the group's teachings by Applewhite and by other members, and then the spreading of them through public meetings, on websites and chatrooms, and in video recordings, can also be considered as religious practices.

However, rather than practising what might be considered religious rituals, the day-to-day living of members could be considered a form of religious practice. Members committed their whole lives to the Class, living a life of monasticism, obedience, and strict body disciplines to prepare for their new lives on the Next Level. The aim of this was individual metamorphosis or self-transformation away from an embodied human life and into an extraterrestrial one.

The main practice of Heaven's Gate was a rejection of everything that was considered key to being human—most importantly, familial and intimate relationships, sources of indulgence and enjoyment (such as desired foods, alcohol, recreational drugs, and leisure time), and careers (although not employment itself as member's took ad hoc day jobs when money was needed and, by the end of the movement, members had established a successful computer company). Members committed to abstention as extraterrestrials were believed to be genderless and beyond human reproduction; mammalian reproduction was believed to tie one to this world and was considered the realm of humans and Luciferians. The Next Level reproduced by harvesting the souls from Earth with 'deposits.' Consequently, there were no children in the movement; members had to leave their children behind if they wanted to join, and a number did so. Sexual abstention was considered an important learning experience. In order to maximise this experience, Nettles and Applewhite ordered the membership into 'check partners,' generally consisting of one man and one woman but sometimes of two gay women or two gay men together, to increase the chances of sexual attraction which then needed to be overcome. The partners spent all their time together, including eating and sleeping, and each would keep the other in 'check.' Friction amongst the personalities was considered a learning experience, as were the difficulties of the tasks they had to undertake, such as asking members of the public for donations of food or petrol. These partnerships

mirrored that of Nettles and Applewhite, although, reportedly, they did not need to overcome sexual attraction or friction.

As noted above, Applewhite had struggled with issues of sexuality and intimacy for all of his adult life. Following the members' deaths in 1997, it was discovered that eight male members, including Applewhite, had been surgically castrated. In 1998, a paper was published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* entitled, "Psychiatric Evaluation of a "Monk" Requesting Castration" (Roberts, Hollifield, and McCarty 1998). The 'monk' was a Heaven's Gate member who had given permission for his case notes, taken in 1995, to be published. He requested castration as his "sexual impulses interfered with his spirituality" (Roberts, Hollifield, and McCarty 1998, 415). Another member had undergone the first castration in 1994. This was referred to as having the vehicle "neutered" within the movement (Zeller 2014, 187).

In addition to sexual abstinence, there were other means through which members sought to emulate life on the Next Level. Members sought to become genderless in appearance. All members shared similar short haircuts without facial hair or jewellery. Over time, unisex uniforms were also introduced. Members chose new names which took the form of three consonants followed by 'ody.' Ody was considered the 'family' name and indicated the member as a 'child of God' and a disciple of Do-Ti (which has a similar sound to 'ody') (Zeller 2014, 139-40). The three consonants were an abbreviated form of a chosen name, for example, Neody (Neo), Srfody (Seraph), Jwnody (June). Following Nettle's death, Applewhite held a group marriage ceremony in which each member was married to him, symbolised by the wearing of a wedding ring. Both the wedding ceremony and the family names indicated the creation of familial bonds between members.

Food was to be consumed only for necessity, and the group followed numerous different diets over the years, most often vegetarian, and including juice diets to induce purging. Life inside the rented houses (termed 'crafts') was intended to emulate life on a spaceship, with the kitchen called the 'nutri-lab,' which produced 'fuel' (food), the laundry the 'fiber-lab,' the office the 'compu-lab,' and more. This use of special nomenclature can also be considered a religious practice, differentiating between members and non-members. Members who were not employed did not leave the house but rather spent their time learning and performing day-to-day tasks, such as cooking, cleaning, and laundry, as disciplined spiritual practice. In 1995, the group purchased land in Manzano, New Mexico, and began the construction of an 'Earth ship,' a communal home made from recycled materials. However, it proved too difficult to construct and the group sold the land after ten months (Zeller 2014, 136).

Robert W. Balch (1995), Janja Lalich (2004a, 2004b), and Susan Raine (2005) have all characterised the everyday practices of Heaven's Gate as a means of socialising members into a life of obedience and discipline, and of eradicating individuality and critical thinking (although it is important to note that Balch [1995] rejects the 'brainwashing' hypothesis). They each point in particular to practices designed to be "mind-numbing," (Balch and Taylor 2002, 215; Lalich 2004b, 7; Raine 2005, 112) such as a practice termed 'the central' in which members had to report to a particular location every eleven minutes to then spend a minute in silent contemplation considering how they could best serve the Next Level. Other practices included the use of a tuning fork to clear the mind and periods of silence ('tomb time'). Members also attended group sessions of critical self-reflection with input from their peers. These practices were not consistent across the movement's history but rather were practised during specific periods and in specific locations.

The suicides themselves were one of the few ritualised acts that the group undertook. The members ate a communal meal before undertaking the suicides in three waves. The remaining members cleared up after each wave, removing the plastic bag which had been placed over the heads of members before death and covering the top half of the body in a purple shroud. The final two members remained unshrouded. Members wore the same clothing and trainers, and had packed bags, glasses, and the same amount of spare change at their bedsides. Materials, including written documents, computer discs and videos, had been sent to sympathetic former members to distribute after the deaths and it was one such member, Neody (Rio DiAngelo), who found the bodies and called the police (see DiAngelo 2007).

Sources and Evidence

Whilst Heaven's Gate is arguably quite well-covered in the literature of new religious movement studies and cultic studies (particularly in studies of millennial movements and/or 'cults and violence'), there are few academics who have focused on the movement in great depth. There are notable exceptions. Robert W. Balch and David Taylor were the first to study the movement in 1975 when they joined the group covertly and spent four months travelling with them as members. They interviewed dozens of members and former members over the years and had their first publications in psychology journals in 1976 and 1977. Balch went on to have numerous publications on the group (1980, 1982, 1985, 1995, 1998) and can be considered one of the leading authorities. He has challenged the brainwashing hypothesis, as well as theories of charismatic leadership and affective bonds as reasons for people joining, instead arguing that the beliefs made sense to a certain group of spiritual seekers. Balch and Taylor's "Making Sense of the Heaven's Gate Suicides" (2002) is essential for understanding how the history of the group's teachings eventually led to the deaths.

The other authority on the movement is Benjamin E. Zeller (2006, 2010, 2014). Zeller's *Heaven's Gate: America's UFO Religion* (2014) is one of the few academic monographs on the group and includes in-depth analysis of their materials as well as interviews with former members. It is the most comprehensive analysis of the history, beliefs, and practices of the group to date. In the monograph, Zeller makes a number of arguments which have been discussed in this article, including that the movement was strongly influenced by aspects of American culture and religion, and that it is best considered as a Christian-inspired religion with New Age influences which applied an "extraterrestrial Biblical hermeneutics" (Zeller 2014, 10).

Other important texts include George D. Chryssides's edited anthology, *Heaven's Gate: Postmodernity and Popular Culture in a Suicide Group* (2011). In this and other articles (e.g., 2004, 2005, 2021), Chryssides argues that Heaven's Gate can be considered a postmodern religion in its "synthesis of different frameworks of meaning" and its piecing "together fragments of information from a variety of disparate sources" (Chryssides 2004, 361-62). He also argues that Applewhite and the members had a lack of biblical literacy, and Applewhite's interpretation of the Bible was limited to very few passages (Chryssides 2021, 382). Other scholars with an interest in UFO religions have written about Heaven's Gate, including James R. Lewis (1995, 2000, 2003), Christopher Partridge (2003), and Hugh B. Urban (2000).

Sociologist Janja Lalich has used Heaven's Gate as a case study for her "bounded choice" theory (2004a, 2004b), arguing that new religions (or "cults" in her terminology) create "self-sealing systems" when four

factors are fulfilled: charismatic authority, a transcendent belief system, systems of control, and systems of influence. These create a “charismatic commitment,” which in turn creates a “true believer,” a “deployable agent” (Lalich 2004b, 2). The member then has “bounded choice,” in that their life is constrained by the rules and regulations of the group but also the impossibility of imagining life outside of it (Lalich 2004, 2). Prior to Lalich’s publications, Winston Davis (2000) had already described Heaven’s Gate members as “deployable agents” in his analysis of the centrality of obedience in the movement.

There also exist a number of books written by journalists (such as Hoffmann and Burke 1997), relatives of members (e.g., Simpson 2012) and ex-members (e.g., DiAngelo 2007). Whilst these contributions are of varying quality, Rio DiAngelo (aka Neody, the member who discovered the bodies in 1997) provides a unique insider perspective and is well-referenced in the academic literature.

There have also been a number of documentaries and podcasts about Heaven’s Gate in more recent years. Zeller was a consultant on the SiriusXM podcast *Heaven’s Gate*, a ten-part series presented by Glynn Washington (2017). This podcast then inspired a four-part HBO Max documentary, *Heaven’s Gate: The Cult of Cults* (2020), directed by Clay Tweel, which Zeller also consulted on.

As noted above, the group’s own materials can still be accessed through their website heavensgate.com. This includes their book of teachings, *How and When ‘Heaven’s Gate’ (The Door to the Physical Kingdom Level Above Human) May Be Entered: An Anthology of Our Materials*, as well as their most important statements and press releases over the years. The website also includes transcripts of their videos. The videos themselves can be found at <https://archive.org/details/HeavensGateVideo>. There is also an archive on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/@HeavensGateDatabase>.

Critical Scholarly Debates, Gaps, and Unresolved Questions

There are a number of critical scholarly debates surrounding Heaven’s Gate which have been touched on throughout this article. These include debates as to how best to characterise the movement’s theology—as predominantly Christian (Partridge 2003; Chryssides 2004; Zeller 2014), as predominantly New Age (Balch 1995, 1998; Lewis 2003), and/or as postmodern (Urban 2000; Chryssides 2004).

There are also debates that touch on the issue of the polarisation of new religious movements studies versus cultic studies and their conceptualisations of issues such as agency, leadership, harm, violence, and more. Key to this is the question of whether members were ‘brainwashed’ or manipulated in some way into their deaths by suicide. Lalich’s ‘bounded choice’ theory suggests that a member’s agency and free choice were reduced the more committed they became to the movement, the more time they spent in its “self-sealing system,” in which there was no “disconfirming evidence” or “reality checks” (Lalich 2004a, 2004b). Balch, Chryssides, and Zeller have each focused to a greater extent on the meaning-making role the movement played in members’ lives and the answers it offered in their spiritual quests. Nevertheless, all agree that the suicides were the logical conclusion to the group’s worldview. Precisely why the date of 22–23 March 1997 was chosen (beyond it being the date that the Hale–Bopp comet was closest to Earth) and the reasoning behind some of the ritualised acts of the suicides remain unresolved questions. Davis (2000) identifies other gaps, including whether any members felt doubt about the suicides (aside from the one member who left when the plan was announced), and queries why some members left in the years

beforehand.

There is debate around the extent to which the notion of charismatic leadership is an adequate explanation for people joining and remaining in the group and its role in the suicides. Scholars have emphasised this to different extents, with Lalich (2004a, 2004b) placing great emphasis on it, and Zeller (2014) and Chryssides (2018, 2021) less so. Connected to this debate and that around brainwashing and agency is the extent to which members were free to leave the movement. Lalich's model suggests that members were not free to leave as they had a self-imposed lack of agency once they were part of the self-sealing system. Chryssides recognises that the longer someone is in a movement, the harder it is to leave, for all kinds of reasons, but that, nevertheless, people did leave; the movement had a high attrition rate throughout its history (Chryssides 2018, 200).

A further debate is the extent to which Applewhite's mental health played a role in the development of the movement. It has been noted already that Applewhite struggled with his sexuality and there is debate as to whether it was a repressed homosexuality that led to the focus on sexual abstention and ultimately castration (see, e.g., Raine 2005) or whether it was a failure in relationships more generally (Zeller 2014). Less discussed in this article are the claims (e.g. Raine 2005) that Applewhite suffered from paranoid schizophrenia. Raine writes that before meeting Nettles, Applewhite was hearing voices (2005, 103): Nettles helped him to make sense of this experience by suggesting that he was hearing communications from spiritual beings. Raine (2005) suggests that Applewhite's rejection of his body, sexuality, and sex in general, combined with a focus on the spirit world, enabled the belief in the body as a "vehicle" which ultimately had to be exited. There is also debate (see e.g. Wessinger 2000, 238; Zeller 2014, 175) as to whether Applewhite himself was ill in 1997, possibly suffering from a form of cancer, and whether this contributed to the timing of the suicides. Wessinger (2000) identifies this as one of the factors contributing to the fragility of the group. It is ironic that for a group which sought to renounce all human tendencies, it was the members' fear that Applewhite could depart before them, as well as their commitment to stick together as a 'family,' which contributed to their suicides.

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