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Heaven's Gate was the name of a UFO religion co-led by Marshall Applewhite and Bonnie Nettles (until her death). The cult's end, coinciding with the appearance of Comet Hale-Bopp, created a sensation in the United States in 1997. Applewhite convinced 39 followers to commit suicide so that their souls could take a ride on a spaceship that they believed was hiding behind the comet; such beliefs have led some observers to characterise the group as a type of "UFO religion".

Origins and history

Heaven's Gate was a secretive New Age religion. Knowledge of their practices is limited. Upon joining the group, members often sold their worldly belongings in order to break their attachments with earthly existence. For many years the group lived in isolation in the western United States. Members often traveled in pairs and rendezvoused with other members for meetings or presentations they gave to recruit new members. For a time, group members lived in a darkened house where they would simulate the experience they expected to have during their long journey in outer space. A publication produced at this time that received some press attention was titled "How to build a U.F.O." and purported to describe an interplanetary spacecraft built out of materials such as old tires. Much of what is known about the group comes from the research of Robert Balch and David Taylor, who infiltrated the group in the 1970s.

The members of the cult added "-ody" to the first names they adopted in lieu of their original given names. For a few months prior to their deaths, three of them, Thurston-ody, Sylvie-ody, and Elaine-ody, worked for Advanced Development Group (ADG), Inc. (now ManTech Advanced Development Group), a small San Diego-based company that developed computer-based instruction for the U. S. Army. Although they were polite and friendly in a reserved way, they tended to keep to themselves. They lived a communal lifestyle in which everyone had the same things and received the same treatment. They believed Star Trek to be actually true [citation needed]. (One of their members was the brother of actress Nichelle Nichols, who played Lt. Uhura. [1] When they quit working for ADG, they told their supervisor that they'd completed their mission. A few weeks later, they were dead.

Structure

The structure of Heaven's Gate resembled that of a medieval monastic order.

Group members gave up their material possessions and lived a highly ascetic lifestyle devoid of many indulgences. Many male members of the cult voluntarily underwent castration as an extreme means of maintaining the ascetic lifestyle.

The cult funded itself through offering professional website designing for clients. The group was tightly knit and everything was shared communally.

Suicide

In preparation for their suicide, members of the cult drank citrus juices to ritually cleanse their bodies of impurities. In the wake of the cult's suicide, some of the members attributed their ability to attract new members to the growth of the Internet. The thirty-nine bodies of the cult members were found in a rented mansion in the upscale San Diego community of Rancho Santa Fe, California on March 26, 1997. Their suicide, conducted in shifts, was accomplished by ingestion of phenobarbital mixed with vodka, along with plastic bags secured around their heads that killed them in their sleep. All 39 members were dressed in identical black shirts and sweat pants along with brand new black-and-white Nike tennis shoes and purple armbands reading "Heaven's gate away team".[1]

The mass suicide of the Heaven's Gate group is one of the most widely known examples of cult suicide.

Media coverage prior to suicide

Although not widely known to the mainstream media, Heaven's Gate were not unknown in UFOlogical circles; as well as a series of academic studies by Robert Blach, they also received coverage in Jacques Vallee's *Messengers of Deception*, in which Vallee described an unusual public meeting organised by the group. Vallee frequently expressed concerns within the book about contactee groups' authoritarian political and religious outlooks, and Heaven's Gate did not escape criticism.

BBC 2 documentary maker Louis Theroux contacted the Heaven's Gate cult whilst making a programme for his *weird weekends* series in early March 1997, in receipt to his e-mail Theroux was told that Heaven's Gate could not take part in the documentary as 'at the present time a project like this would be an interference with what we must focus on'.

Heaven's Gate in popular culture

The vast media coverage of the Heaven's Gate incident brought about a huge public awareness of the religious cult. In a sense, it was also an Internet phenomenon, since the web was in its early years and the notion of being able to view webpages featuring and created by persons who had recently died was very much a novelty.

This wide coverage would eventually spill over into the entertainment industry, especially among television shows that were inspired by a cult (not always necessarily Heaven's Gate) to create stories that parodied, or otherwise explored, this particular subject.

A Cult's Two-Decade Odyssey of Regimentation

New York Times/March 29, 1997

By Frank Bruni

For 39 men and women who believed they were bound for a starry utopia in outer space, the fare to the heavens was a life adhering to exacting prescriptions and regimens.

At their sprawling house in Rancho Santa Fe, Calif., they woke at predetermined intervals to pray. They ate the same food at the same hours. They wore short haircuts and shapeless clothing, intended to distract them from such frivolous realities as sexuality or even sexual identity.

Previously, when members of the cult traveled the country in 1994 in an effort to expand their ranks, they were spotted with identical wedding bands on their fingers, symbols of their marriage to one another and their subjugation of the self to the group.

Common rituals and a common sense of purpose were the supposed passports to paradise, and these defined the community of believers who died in what may have been the largest mass suicide in American history, much as they define other cults whose existence depends on rendering members docile and rapt.

Over the years, the precise details of life inside the cult led by Marshall Herff Applewhite changed. In the late 1970s, for example, the group reportedly lived in a Wyoming encampment in the Rocky Mountains where members sometimes wore hoods over their heads and altered their work chores every 12 minutes in accordance with beeps from a command tent.

Just before the end, in contrast, they lived in an exclusive suburban enclave, having traded campground drudgery for high-tech prowess and the designing of Web pages for companies that wanted a presence on the Internet.

But as a more complete portrait of the cult emerged from interviews with experts on cults, statements of former members and published reports, it became clear that for most of the group's history, which spanned more than two decades, its members followed specific scripts as they pursued a shared destiny.

"Anyone willing to play by the rules was welcome," Robert W. Balch, a professor of sociology at the University of Montana who studied the group for years, wrote in a 1995 book.

It also became clear that the Total Overcomers, or Heaven's Gate -- just two of the names adopted by the group over the years -- always recruited new members in a manner that could be described as almost bashful.

Keeping its address secret, the group would advertise meetings with posters, discourage potential recruits from joining on the spot and insist that they come to a follow-up session, sometimes at a location that would be difficult to reach. In one case, aspiring members had to travel to a post office 800 miles from the initial meeting place so that they could look in a ZIP-code book for the scribbled directions to the next meeting place.

Longtime members talked to new recruits about free will even as those recruits were effectively robbed of that capacity and were encouraged to cast away the detritus of their lives before joining.

"They were very explicit -- people had to make a free and conscious choice," Balch said in an interview Friday.

Balch, posing as a recruit, traveled with members of the group for two months in 1975 as they pitched tents in a variety of Western states. He said Applewhite and the co-leader, Bonnie Lu Nettles, who died of natural causes in 1985, had even bought bus tickets home for people who wanted to leave the group and had once driven a defector to the airport.

But Applewhite and Ms. Nettles, calling themselves Bo and Peep, as in shepherds of a flock, also encouraged recruits to renounce their former lives.

Robert Rubin, now a 48-year-old supermarket clerk, attended a presentation they gave in Waldport, Ore., in the fall of 1975. He said Friday that he had quickly heeded their call to shed his material possessions and had given away his house and land.

Rubin, then 26, accompanied Applewhite and Ms. Nettles to an outdoor camp in Colorado, he said, where he and other recruits gave the couple their money and their driver's licenses.

"We changed our names and were told to break all contact with friends and family," Rubin said. "We were told not to watch television or to read anything but the red-letter edition of the Bible. For five months, the only distraction I had was to read the Bible."

Rubin, who left the cult after that span of time, also recalls a feature of life in the group that cult experts say is extremely significant: Each member was given a partner of sorts and encouraged to travel always in a pair.

"They did it to keep you in that mindset," Rubin said. "The partner was there, if you were falling out of what you had to do, so you wouldn't fall out. It was part of the mind control."

Those susceptible to that mind control were most often people in their 20s who had already embarked on spiritual quests of one sort or another. Testimonials by longtime members of the group that were included in a book it published on the Internet in 1995 give a strong sense of this.

"For a few years, I went through wanting to become a nun," wrote one member, who identified herself by the name Lvvody. "Nothing seemed right." She added that in 1975, after hitchhiking across America and other countries, she saw a poster in Oregon advertising a discussion about UFOs. She went to it, meeting Applewhite, Ms. Nettles and their disciples.

"Now that I was connected to my Teachers," she wrote, "I knew I was safe."

But life in the group apparently grew more severe and regimented at some point after that. A member named Paul Groll who was interviewed by Time magazine for an article published in August 1979 described the encampment in Wyoming as a place of ritual.

Members had to wear gloves at all times, Groll said, and communicate almost entirely through written messages, their speech limited to "yes," "no" or "I don't know." Meals were eaten twice daily, he said, and their contents, called "formulas," were scrawled on a blackboard.

His description of life with the cult at that time is confirmed in large part by Balch. In "The Gods Have Landed," a 1995 book including a chapter by Balch, he quotes a former member as saying the group had "a procedure for every conscious moment of life." That included cooking, eating, bathing, washing clothes and sleeping, Balch wrote.

By some accounts, one member inherited \$300,000 at some point, and factions of the group moved into houses in the Denver and Dallas areas. The precise timing of this is unclear, and the cult's activities in the 1980s, when it kept a low profile, are difficult to pinpoint.

But by 1993 the group had resurfaced, and in 1994 various people came into contact with representatives who spoke at public lectures, again summoning interested people through posters.

The posters were often misleading, making it appear that the discussion was simply about UFOs. They were frequently placed in college towns and in cities and places of business known to attract people with New Age interests.

Four members of the group showed up in Taos, N.M., in April 1994. Three months later, five members popped up in Madison, Wis.

Balch ran into representatives in Missoula, Mont., around that time. "They were supersecretive," he said Friday. "They wouldn't tell me where they were staying or the phone number. I had to call an answering machine in Seattle and leave a number, and they'd call me back."

Bob Waldrep, another cult expert, ran into them in Birmingham, Ala., when they held a meeting there. It lasted three hours, he said, during which representatives offered listeners glimpses of life in the group.

According to Waldrep's notes from that meeting, one representative, referring to the group's Older Members, or leaders, said: "The OMs have experimented with many different diets for us to determine the most efficient. The only purpose for food is to fuel the vehicles," the cult's term for bodies.

Obsession with food also characterized the members who ended up in the house in Rancho Santa Fe. According to published reports, the members ate a large communal meal at 5 a.m. and no other meals during the day except for snacks of fruit and a lemon drink seasoned with cayenne pepper.

They also woke every day at 3 a.m. for prayer and, according to an employee of Arrowhead General, a company for which the group did free-lance computer work, recoiled whenever someone made physical contact with them.

To touch or hug them was almost offensive to them," he said. "They did not like to be touched."

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Suicide in San Diego

Were cultists recruited on the Web?

Salon/March 28, 1997

By Jonathan Broder

"The really frightening thing one finds here is the combination of the technology of the World Wide Web and the old celestial astrology that has been around since the beginning of human history."

As of Thursday afternoon, little was known about the 39 men and women who were found dead in a luxurious house in Rancho Santa Fe, Calif. They were of various ages, sported buzz-cut hairstyles, and were found with purple shrouds covering their faces and chests. They also reportedly worked for a Web design company called WW Higher Source. One of the Web sites designed by Higher Source, according to news reports, was for an organization called Heaven's Gate -- which planned to leave Earth and rendezvous with a spaceship behind the Hale-Bopp comet. It appears that the victims were members of this organization.

"The joy is that our Older Member in the Evolutionary Level above human (the 'Kingdom of Heaven') has made it clear to us that Hale-Bopp's approach is the 'marker' we've been waiting for," a statement on the Heaven's Gate site read. "Our 22 years of classroom here on planet Earth is finally coming to conclusion -- 'graduation' from the Human Evolutionary Level. We are happily prepared to leave 'this world' and go with Ti's crew."

If, as now appears, the 39 people committed mass suicide, what would have been their motivation? Salon spoke Thursday with Larry A. Trachte, assistant professor of religion at Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa. Trachte, who is also the college pastor, has taught courses on contemporary religions and sects for the past 15 years.

We've had People's Temple, the Order of the Solar Temple and now Higher Source. What makes these groups commit mass suicide?

I don't think they see it as suicide. As bizarre as it might seem to us, I'm sure that they saw it as moving on to another dimension of existence. Much as a Hindu or Buddhist would, in the sense of a reincarnation or migration to another realm of being.

So the people who died in Rancho Santa Fe weren't committing suicide, they were moving on to another adventure in some other dimension?

Yes, and I might add that there are traces of that belief in some Eastern religions. Suicide is often viewed in Buddhism as a noble way. Death is not seen as an enemy or as something to fear or flee. Even suicide is seen in a much more different light than in the West.

Based on what we know as of now, is there anything about this California group that sets it apart?

The really frightening thing one finds here is the combination of the technology of the World Wide Web and the old celestial astrology that has been around since the beginning of human history. You have an interesting dichotomy of beliefs coming together. There are literally thousands of groups like this all over now. All you have to do is search for them on the World Wide Web.

Why is the Web so attractive to these groups?

It adds an entirely new dimension to recruiting and accessibility. It opens up another dimension of cult possibilities and awareness that never existed before.

Many of the people who are drawn to cults are seeking absolute answers. They're often very bright, but they're introverts in terms of social skills and personality. So getting into religion on a computer is perfect for these kind of people. It provides instant access, it knows no geographical bounds, it allows for anonymity and yet a high degree of individuality. So just as people use their telephones for sex, you can use your computer for religion.

Again, based on what we know so far, does this San Diego cult sound like a doomsday or millenarian cult?

No. I didn't hear any of the language you would expect to hear from a doomsday or millennialist group that sits around waiting for the end of the world. It sounds more like a combination of some of the dimensions of a UFO cult, plus the appearance of this Hale-Bopp. Add the fact that it was highly organized -- probably around a leader and therefore highly suggestible -- and you end up with a rather unique combination of things.

And that's true of many of the new groups now. They're very creative. They're creating their own rules and theologies. And to the extent that groups like this have access to tens of thousands of people on the Internet, that's kind of scary. It used to be that you had to stand in an airport to recruit those who wandered by. Now, all you have to do is open up a Web site.

Is there any significance that this apparent mass suicide occurred around the solstice and Easter?

It appears this was a rather eclectic group, drawing from different sources and associations. So given that this is Holy Week, I'm sure that was one part of it. But I've heard their suicide was their way of joining a UFO that was traveling behind the Hale-Bopp comet. Some have suggested this was a strictly Christian group, but it doesn't sound very Christian to me. I would say it was more of a contemporary, New Age sort of group with a strong leader.

The age-old question: What kind of people join these groups?

One shouldn't oversimplify, but generally, it's people who are searching, who are discontented. They are idealists. They're often very bright and creative, the kind of people who easily become bored with mainline religion and want a new kind of adventure. At the same time, they are often looking for absolute answers. It's an interesting dialectic. I don't think it's accidental that many people who lean toward the sciences end up as fundamentalist Christians. On college campuses, the science departments often are the most conservative departments. These are people who are quite literal thinkers. They're looking for hard facts, answers, someone to tell them what reality is.

So in these cults, you have, on the one hand, the vulnerability of people who are searching and frustrated, combined with people who have some very creative answers that are exciting, new and adventuresome. But they're often also very isolated, in some ways the misfits of society. They don't have a lot of close relationships. The cults create pseudo-family. It was interesting to hear that even with all these people in the San Diego house, no one was talking to one another. They were always in front of their computer screens.

Yet while they may not have spoken with one another, they all died together. So they must have related to one another in some way.

Or to the leader. The definition of a cult is that it has an absolute leader who exercises absolute authority over the followers. So if the leader says, "This is what we're going to do," that's what they do. And whether that leader is Jim Jones or Do, as they called this fellow in San Diego, or David Koresh, the basic allegiance is to the leader. He is the one who dispenses reality. And if that leader says it's time to check out of this world and go on to the next, his followers check out.

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