The Spaceship Suicide
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CULTS

The Spaceship Suicide

Eastern Faiths falsely implicated as 39 members of a radical Christian UFO cult die in hopes of joining an alien craft following comet Hale-Bopp

On March 23, 1997, the first 15 members of Heaven's Gate, a self-described "cult of cults," mixed phenobarbital with sweet pudding, washed it down with vodka, covered their heads with plastic bags and suffocated to death. Fifteen more took their own lives the next day in the swank, $1.6 million rented mansion near San Diego, California. On the third day, the remaining nine died. When discovered the next morning by a former member, each body was neatly laid out on a cot or bed, dressed identically in black pants and brand new black Nike sneakers, partly covered with a purple shroud, identification in one pocket, a five-dollar bill and some coins in another. A packed suitcase sat nearby.

Their leader, Marshall Herff Applewhite, died with them, shortly after proclaiming on the Internet that he was Jesus Christ returned to Earth. Tragically, this charismatic former opera singer and son of a Presbyterian Christian minister had convinced 21 female and 17 male well-educated, middle-class Americans, ages 26 to 72, to kill themselves, attain the "Level Beyond Human" and join him on a spaceship following Comet Hale-Bopp.

Even as refrigerated coroner's vans removed decomposing bodies from the house, Eastern faiths, the New Age and the Internet became the scapegoats in a desperate search for some kind of rational explanation of this bizarre incident--the largest mass suicide in US history. Parallels were drawn with the People's Temple suicide of 900 persons in Guyana in the 1970s, the Branch Davidians deaths in Waco, Texas, in 1993 and the Solar Temple suicides in Europe and Canada in '94 and '95. These groups' obvious common denominator--Christianity--was unwanted knowledge for Americans, and the media was loathe to mention it is as they recounted the strange history and theology of Heaven's Gate.

Applewhite had been assembling his chosen group since the 1970s, initially with Bonnie Lu Trusdale Nettles, a nurse he met while undergoing treatment at a mental institution. She left her family behind to join Applewhite in a nomadic existence, camping their way across America. Together they concluded they were the two witnesses mentioned in the Christian Bible's "Book of Revelations." They slowly collected followers by holding meetings where they frankly declared that they and whoever choose to follow them would be picked up by spaceships and taken to heaven. They went by the name "The Two" or "The UFO Two" and by a variety of nicknames, lastly "Ti and Do," after the musical notes in the Western scale. "Unidentified Flying Object" (UFO) has come to name an entire movement of people who believe alien spacecraft are visiting the Earth.

Bonnie--Ti--died of cancer in 1985, and after that Applewhite--Do--continued the organization, claiming that Ti was now in heaven waiting for the others. He insisted his

followers regard their physical bodies as "vehicles" and forbade sex among members--even to the point of castration for several of the men, including Applewhite himself. Everyone wore black and kept their hair trimmed short. The group supported themselves by odd jobs as they wandered about the United States, and finally by designing Internet Web pages from their San Diego mansion. They were proficient programmers and counted among their clients many local businesses.

Heaven's Gate was not the first American group to believe they were destined for rescue from planet Earth by aliens. However, earlier groups who announced exactly when and where it would happen have been embarrassingly stood up as the promised flying saucer failed to arrive. Applewhite initially believed that a real flying saucer would land to pick them up--announcing so in 1975. That never happened, and he too was derided. Later his belief changed to one of shedding the "vehicle," the body, to allow transport of the soul to a new physical body aboard a spacecraft crewed by ET-like aliens. Though he and his followers did not know when this might occur, they were continuously on alert for departure. Apparently they awaited fulfillment of the prophecy of Revelation 11.12: "And they heard a great voice from heaven saying unto them, 'Come up hither.' And they ascended up to heaven in a cloud; and their enemies beheld them."

When Comet Hale-Bopp appeared, Applewhite--now openly saying he was Jesus returned--took this to be a sign that the end had come. Earth was about to be "recycled, spaded under." Ti--whom Applewhite said was really the "Holy Father," as in "Our Father Who art in heaven…"--was piloting a

spacecraft, following in the wake of Hale-Bopp which had come to transport them--the ascent into heaven, which they held to be a physical place.

These beliefs were reinforced by an Internet-wide debate over whether an unidentified object was indeed accompanying Hale-Bopp, as three photographs suggested. Such a theory might in the past not get much publicity in the mass media, but the Internet is a method of communication that provides equal access to the legitimate and the far-fetched, to the responsible report and the outright fraud. The website which advocates the existence of this accompanying object (and a coverup by world governments) is just as available on the Internet as is that of NASA or any of the world's observatories. But what was a harmless argument over some photos--all of which were explained or dismissed as hoaxes--became something very different when Applewhite decided the object was indeed Ti's spacecraft and initiated earnest preparations for the group's suicide. In January, Applewhite posted a four-page message on the Web and 95 newsgroups entitled "Undercover Jesus Surfaces Before Departure." He wrote, "I am about to return to my Father's Kingdom. This return requires that I prepare to lay down my borrowed human body ... as I did approximately 2,000 years ago as Jesus."

Members went to Mexico to buy the lethal drugs. Those in San Diego bought a telescope to check on the supposed spaceship trailing the comet, but returned it a week later when they were unable to locate any such object. Nevertheless, preparations proceeded apace, and the day after Hale-Bopp's closest approach to Earth on March 22nd, the suicides began.

Searching for Blame: Hinduism Today's analysis of media reports suggests that bias in wording and emphasis repeatedly shifted the blame and responsibility as far East as possible, and played down or covered up the Christian basis of Applewhite's philosophy. A few publications did not do this. For example, The Washington Post, citing experts such as Jim Lewis (who had actually known the group, unlike most other experts sounding forth on Heaven's Gate) said, "Applewhite never strayed entirely from his Christian upbringing, and to the end his theology was based on the Book of Revelation." Likewise, the Sacramento Bee quoted University of California professor of sociology Dr. John R. Hall that "all kinds of" Applewhite's views were "long-standing beliefs in Christianity."

Elsewhere, a single, loaded word--guru--was sufficient to skew the facts. Newsweek reported, "The most important cause of death may have been the cult's guru." Yet, according to that magazine's own four-page analysis of Applewhite's philosophy, its single, tenuous connection with Hinduism was his "vision of time as cyclical." Time magazine, too, wrote, "the future guru ..." Now, in the West, guru has come to be a common word, used for media guru, stock market guru, software guru, more or less as in India guru means any kind of teacher. But when it comes to religion, guru means just one thing: Hinduism. There are no Catholic gurus, no Protestant gurus, no Muslim gurus, no Buddhist gurus. Applewhite--who did call himself Father John Do--was not labeled minister, priest, imam, roshi, lama, pastor or chaplain in the media, but guru, and not to mean "remover of darkness," the word's real and literal sense, but now as "cause of death." The term for Hinduism's highest religious guides, souls often of immense personal attainment, had been summoned to imply sinister leadership.

Applewhite did not call himself a guru, and he did not follow Hindu teachings. In fact, he stated, "One of the major tools of Lucifer is the New Age movement--Theosophy, Ascended Masters, channeling, Eastern religions, mysticism, yoga, Christ consciousness within, and the 'Ye are God' concept. All are a fantasy and a trap." He elsewhere wrote "karma is a counterfeit," "reincarnation at birth is a completely inaccurate concept," and "mantras ... are spawned from corrupted truths." A word count on the 470-page book published on their website found Jesus 331 times, Bible 41, but guru only 3, and no mention at all of Vedas, dharma or moksha.

In analyzing Applewhite's philosophy, most publications would cite "Christianity" and "Eastern beliefs," as dual sources. Each time Christianity was mentioned, it would be carefully qualified. For example, Newsweek called his philosophy a "s trange brew of twisted Christian theology." Then they said it also contained, "elements of Eastern religions." Not "twisted elements," just "elements." The implication? That there is already something wrong, something twisted about Eastern beliefs. It is a subtle bias, one which obscures the very real Christian basis of Applewhite's philosophy and tries again to shift the blame to the East.

Protest can change detrimental descriptions. In a March 28th Reuter's wire service report titled "Mass suicide shows no sign of shaking U.S. cults," a swiftly-issued correction replaced "Church of Scientology, a movement that has been accused of driving members to suicide and bankruptcy" with "Church of Scientology, a U.S.-based international religion"--obviously a result of protests from the offended Scientologists.

Swamis contacted by Hinduism Today judged the Heaven's Gate group misguided, and their goal of reaching a spaceship impossible, but were sympathetic to their sincerity and discipline in searching for a higher meaning to life. From the Hindu point of view, suicide committed as a means of escape from unwanted circumstances is a poor choice to make. The soul is left in a state of limbo, earthbound, aimlessly floating on the astral plane, where it remains until the time death would have occurred naturally. Then it rapidly reincarnates into exactly the same unwanted karmic situation it sought to escape.

The issue for Hindus is not so much that of suicide, but the continuing media slant which attributes the Heaven's Gate incident to some corrupting Eastern influence. As was found recently with an offensive music album cover [see Hindu Protest (this issue)] and by the change the Scientologists finessed in their case, protests can and do work.

Suicide: Upside/Downside

Five swamis critique media, spaceships and suicide

Swami Atmarupananda (Vedanta Society of Southern California, San Diego): I am in the area where the suicides happened. In reporting on the Heaven's Gate suicide, the media showed more restraint than usual: with some exceptions, they didn't rush to demonize the participants as they often do with strange religious phenomena. However there was once again this strange and totally unfair association of the Heaven's Gate with Eastern religion. Just as Jews, Christians and Muslims have voices to respond to unfair treatment in the media, so Hindus need the same: not a fanatical voice that imagines insult at every turn, but a

reasoned and balanced voice that responds to genuine prejudicial treatment. I think the act of the Heaven's Gate members was a mistake, but I also see much good, as a Hindu is philosophically free to do. It was, I think, a mistake to follow someone with a promise that had no verification outside of his own words. That's the value of a tradition, it is time-tested in the experience of many, and that's the value of scriptures, which are the recorded experiences of others. Perhaps the participants had a personality flaw which made them susceptible to the influence of one man's strange promise. But the followers of Heaven's Gate also showed remarkable sincerity, singleness of purpose, discipline, purity, no matter how mistaken they were in their basic premise. Such good qualities never go to waste. No genuine sacrifice, even if misguided, goes to waste. To believe that people that are sincerely motivated and good-hearted but mistaken in the object of their motivation will, because of that mistake, be in any sense completely lost is a hellish doctrine, and contrary to the Hindu tradition which recognizes goodness--and the triumphant power of goodness--wherever it is found.

Prabhushri Swami Amar Jyoti (Founder, Desert Ashram, Arizona, USA): It is unfair to associate these things with Eastern beliefs or Hinduism. It is purely a Western or American phenomenon. Almost all of these tragedies have occurred in Christian groups. It is the result of failure of the modern Western culture and religion. The media portrayal of such incidents is very unfair, trying to "pass the buck" as well as place the blame "at the door of Eastern beliefs." In principle, I do not support suicide--it is not right--but in practice there are exceptions which can be acceptable and have their own use/need. [The threat to fast to death] as in the case of Mahatma Gandhi, whose method was nonviolent and selfless,

was alright and even laudable. But the same can and has been exploited by some others for the wrong purposes, stubbornly, as brats would do selfishly to get their own way.

Swami Chetanandanda (Head, Nityananda Institute, Oregon): From the Hindu perspective, the idea that going from one place in a physical universe to another place in a physical universe is an advancement is ridiculous. Because the soul is eternal and one, suicide is not considered such a terrible thing under certain circumstances. It is not terrible when suicide takes place under conditions by which you are preserving your own personal integrity or conserving limited resources used better by others (self-sacrifice). It is not terrible to sacrifice oneself for the real possibility of advancing important humanitarian ideas (as in Gandhi's case). In these situations suicide leads to a higher reincarnation. In other cases, such as attempting to escape difficult circumstances, suicide might be an unfortunate decision. Suicide simply would be an extension of the unfortunate circumstances--circumstances that one will inevitably face countless times until they are surmounted.

Swami Bua Maharaj (Indo-American Yoga-Vedanta Society, New York): In the wake of this suicide, some persons have tried to compare this abhorrent act to Hindu beliefs and practices. Some cite Gandhi's willingness to "fast to death" or the self-immolation of Padmani (and all women of the Jaipur palace) during the terror of the Moguls in the 16th century. There is no comparison whatsoever between the Heaven's Gate deaths and the countless Hindus who have embraced death rather than compromise their honor. The Heaven's Gate members have not risen to a higher level, but have sunken to a lower one. Like many other lost souls, they were misguided

and misrepresented. Whereas Padmani and the others surely rose to a higher level of being--because they died to preserve their honor, not just to satisfy their curiosity. To grasp the Truth, one has to let go of one's own ego and misconceptions. One is not enlightened overnight, nor is one enlightened by chasing after a comet, or jumping on the bandwagon of some cult. We need to still our own mind and become humble, responsible and resourceful human beings. If we want to leave our mark on the world, then let it not be written in blood and tears, but in the sweet sweat of our own unnoticed and unselfish service.

H.D. Swami Prakashanand Saraswati (Founder, Barsana Dham, Texas, USA): Intention or action of committing suicide is sin according to Hindu religion. Human life is a gift of God to receive His love and vision; it is not for destroying willfully. The consequence is always a downfall of the soul. Depending upon the non-Godly beliefs, desires and the intention of the person, he may be reborn in a miserable state in a human form, or he may enter into lower species. There is a definite rule in the universe. One cannot escape it. Whatever a persons' mind is before death, agitated, envious, worldly, non-Godly, etc., in a similar state is he reborn in this very world. Thinking of going into a spaceship by committing suicide is the product of a sick mind. The public must be aware of such cults and not fall for them. There are three main indications of such cults: A) They do not worship an omnipresent personal form of God as prescribed in our main scriptures; B) Their way of worship is more or less secretive; it is not open to the public, and they like to remain aloof from the general society; C) They believe in the supernatural power or existence which they may call as God and talk of joining with that, but they don't believe in the gracious kindness, love and the vision of Supreme God.

Full text of swami's comments available at:
hinduismtoday.kauai.hi.us/resources/suicide/leadersviews.html