

THEOLOGY UPDATE

HEAVEN'S GATE AND THE THEOLOGY OF SUICIDE

By Ted Peters

Why, the world asks, would thirty-nine (now forty) people voluntarily commit suicide as an expression of their religious beliefs? Does such a bizarre event have a hidden logic? Is the chemical mixture of UFOs with the religious psyche a volatile one, a formula for fanatical commitment? What is the chemistry of beliefs that led to the combustion point? We sort of understand how religious groups can be violent toward one another; but what kind of belief system would lead to the final act of violence against its own most faithful adherents?

A quarter-century of spiritual pressure led up to the explosion of death during the visit of the Hale-Bopp comet in the Spring of 1997. This cries out for understanding, sympathetic understanding. The UFO phenomenon at large is such a mystery that it defies rational understanding; and the role religious sensibilities play in the UFO phenomenon only makes it even more mysterious. The Heaven's Gate tragedy may provide a portal we can walk through to find some insight.

This UFO event is a religious event. It deserves theological analysis. Why? Opinions vary. Martin Marty, for example, is concerned with the fallout of bad

press that religion in general might get from the Heaven's Gate bomb. After all, what distinguishes suicidal fanaticism of this sort from what mainline Christians or Jews or Muslims believe and do? Well, Marty admits, on the surface all these things might look alike. But, below the surface, they're not. Religion can be trusted, he believes. The religions of Abraham, "for all their real limits and awesome flaws, in the main have been agents of healing, leaders in acts of justice and mercy."¹

My concern is not the bad press that mainline religion needs to protect itself from. My concern is that the UFO phenomenon in general and the Heaven's Gate tragedy in particular are signs of something important going on in our culture. We have a culture that thinks of itself as secular; but in fact it consists of a superficial secular overlay of science and technology along with a repressed but rebellious religious energy driving it from underneath. Understanding the UFO phenomenon may be a key for unlocking this cultural contortion.

But what about the violence perpetrated by the Heaven's Gate believers against themselves? Decisive here is that inside Heaven's Gate this did not look like violence; rather, it looked like the door to salvation. Only the outsiders would see it as violence, as something to avoid. Although the Heaven's Gate tragedy has been linked by some to the murder-suicide combinations of the Solar Temple demise, David Koresh's Branch Davidian holocaust at Waco, and the mass deaths at Jonestown, the Rancho Santa Fe group was not violent. Apocalyptic, yes. Violent, no.

The Roswell Insurrection

There is a hint—only the slightest hint—of potential violence within the community of UFO believers in this country. It comes from believing in what later in this article we will call the "UFO myth." To the extent that the UFO myth follows René Girard's theory of myth, peace between enemies is made possible by scapegoating a third party.² In the case of the UFO myth, a peaceful

alliance has been formed between science and religion. Who, then, is the scapegoat? The U.S. government. Let me first offer a brief sidebar on scapegoating and then get back to the main agenda, namely, the gnosticized spirituality of Heaven's Gate that made death look like life.

Like thousands of others, I made my July 4, 1997 pilgrimage to Roswell to celebrate the 50th anniversary of modern Ufology. At 11:00 pm on July 4, 1947, so it is told, a delta-shaped space vehicle crashed 23 miles north of this New Mexico city and spilled its five extraterrestrial occupants out onto the dry pasture land. At the half-century anniversary, the all-stars of contemporary Ufology—Erich von Däniken, John Mack, Whitley Strieber, Linda Moulton Howe, Stanton Friedman, Robert O. Dean, Kevin Randle, Donald Schmitt, Budd Hopkins, and others—took the podium purportedly to rehearse the historical Roswell events. Yet the speeches were dominated by angry denunciations of the U.S. government. The credibility of claiming a crash occurred at Roswell seemed to depend solely on the existence of information now being concealed by Washington. The answer to the big mystery regarding extraterrestrial visitation exists, the speakers held, but it is being deliberately withheld by an authoritarian and stubborn and paternalistic military intelligence network.

Stanton Friedman insists that the controversial *MJ-12* document demonstrates clearly that beginning with President Truman in 1947 our government has intentionally and systematically engaged in a cover-up. Linda Moulton Howe chastises Washington for denying truth to the American people. Robert O. Dean, retired after 27 years in the U.S. Army with special NATO intelligence assignments, decries the totalitarian attitude of a government that has lost respect for its own citizenry. At Roswell he cried for public resistance.

"Flying saucers are real," argues Kevin Randle, "they are extraterrestrial, and the government, through its conspiracy of silence, has tried to keep us in the dark."³ Randle, a former intelligence officer with the U.S. Air Force, says,

¹Martin Marty, "Playing with Fire," *The Christian Century* 114/13 (April 16, 1997) 379.

²René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1977) and *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1986).

³Kevin D. Randle, *Conspiracy of Silence* (New York: Avon, 1997) 7.

"There clearly was a directed program from inside the government whose job it was to obscure the truth. The room is littered with smoking guns. It is littered with cold pistols that provide us with additional information about UFOs."⁴

The Dummies

The headquarters of the United States Air Force only added fuel to the flames of public anger by releasing on June 24, 1997—the 50th anniversary to the day of Kenneth Arnold's sighting of discs near Mount Rainier that resulted in the name "flying saucers," officially marking the beginning of modern ufology—its arrogantly titled *The Roswell Report: Case Closed*.⁵ A thinly disguised tone of ridicule comes through the text. Along with the condescending tone come insulting arguments such as that anthropomorphic dummies dropped from balloons after 1954 are probably what people mistakenly took for the bodies of space visitors in 1947. While in Roswell I bought a tee shirt with the picture of a gray alien on the front. On the back the shirt reads: "What do you think we look like...DUMMIES?"

It appears obvious to me that in fact the U.S. Air Force and other governmental agencies have from time to time treated the public paternalistically and deliberately filtered UFO-related information. I'm inclined to believe that this is due more to bureaucratic ineptness than to any malevolent conspiracy. And even if a conspiracy of silence exists in Washington, it may not necessarily be the case that what is being covered up is knowledge of extraterrestrial beings. It may rather be knowledge of military matters deemed secret for security reasons.

My task here is by no means to put the government on trial and find it innocent. Scapegoats can very well be guilty. My only point is to show that Washington has been cast into the scapegoat role for the benefit of the UFO-believing community. Blaming the government for a cover-up makes it easier to sustain the UFO myth when evidence seems to lead elsewhere. No matter how much evidence could be mustered to show that what we thought were visitors from space were in fact

something terrestrial or otherwise quite ordinary, true believers can always say that the decisive evidence still exists. It's just that right now it's locked up in government files somewhere.

This places government spokespersons in a catch 22. If they publicly announce what intelligence files show about UFOs, and if these files fail to indicate any knowledge regarding their alleged extraterrestrial origin, then UFO believers can simply repeat the liturgy: "more cover-up!"

The scientific mindset, which claims UFO investigation to be careful and scrupulous, can blame the government for its violation of scientific principles. The government fails to attend to the facts. It fails to dedicate itself to pursuing the truth. Therefore, Washington is culpable.

Similarly, the religious impulses driving the UFO subculture from underneath can demonize the government. "This is the most important event in a millennium," said Stanton Friedman.⁶ At Roswell others declared that contact with other civilizations in space is the most important event in all of human evolutionary history. The truth in this matter will alter our very self-understanding as human beings, the speakers reiterated. We are on the threshold of something of which the magnitude and significance is unmeasurable. And full access to these messengers of transcendence is denied us because of a conspiracy on the part of our own government! How dastardly!

Let me offer an observation and register a fear. The observation is that the UFO-believing community in this country represents a cross-section of American life. The Roswell event drew families in RVs complete with barbecues and one very important hobby, book reading. UFOers are readers. Many belong to the military or have retired from active duty. These are people with a sense of humor, a capacity to laugh at themselves. Their distrust of Uncle Sam does not bespeak a general mistrust of governmental authority nor is it evidence of a lack of pride and loyalty to their country. The disgruntlement is focused on a single issue, namely, the UFO cover-up.

Now to my fear. In the Fall 1997 issue of *dialog*, especially in the articles by Catherine Wessinger and John Hel-

geland, we read about conflictual dualism and the siege mentality of other apocalypticists. The militia groups on the margins of otherwise pluralistic America are feeling disenfranchised and ready to fight in the Battle of Armageddon. This does not typify the UFO believers in any way. However, one could imagine a national crisis of some sort that might cause these two otherwise different groups to suddenly recognize each other. One could imagine a blunder on the part of Washington that could suddenly make the potentially violent militia groups and the benign UFO believers see each other as allies in resistance against federal authority. That would be a tragedy larger than Heaven's Gate. One well worth trying to prevent.

Now to the central agenda of this article, a careful analysis of the Heaven's Gate group that will lead to a broader understanding of the curious marriage of science and religion in the emerging UFO myth. Our walk through the next few pages will take us through the belief system—the worldview or cosmology plus doctrines—that made mass suicide seem like salvation. We will find a mixed potion of apocalyptic Christianity, body-denying gnosticism, reverence for science, and the UFO myth. The latter, the belief that UFOs can provide salvation, will pinpoint our focal interest. In our modern and emerging post-modern culture where science and technology have for centuries been given the role of authority in knowledge, pre-modern religious commitments have been repressed. Angels and other spiritual beings have been eliminated. The world has been disenchanting. But with UFOs angels are back again, now as hybrids of technology and spirit. In a scientific and technological age UFOs fly to us with a load of religious baggage, with suitcases filled with spiritual quali-

⁴*Ibid.*, 6.

⁵Headquarters United States Air Force, *The Roswell Report: Case Closed*, obtainable from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington DC 20402.

⁶See: Stanton T. Friedman, *Top Secret Majic* (New York: Marlowe, 1996) and Don Berliner and Stanton T. Friedman, *Crash at Corona* (New York: Marlowe, 1992, 1997). For a skeptic's refutation see Kal K. Korff, *The Roswell UFO Crash* (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1997).

ties such as transcendence, omniscience, perfection, and redemption. The theological task, as always, is to discern the life-giving spirits—that is, to distinguish what is truly worthy of trusting belief from mere idols.

To Die Is to Live

"If you want to go to heaven, I can take you through that gate," said Do (pronounced 'Doe') to the world via the Higher Source home page on the web.⁷ That kingdom of heaven, he had been saying for twenty-five years, is located at the "Level Above Human," otherwise described as the "Next Evolutionary Level." That heavenly level is beyond the earthly reality. It is beyond mortality. We need to transcend our earthly bodies to get there. We need to engage in spiritual discipline, a rigorous discipline that sheds us of everything human and physical. Like a caterpillar undergoing metamorphosis, following Do means undergoing a radical change from embodied to disembodied to reembodyed existence. Then, once the change has been accomplished, we would receive a ticket to fly aboard a UFO to "the kingdom of Heaven—in the literal and physical heavens."

Our human bodies, he said, are "containers" for soul deposits. Our bodies with all their mammalian ways such as thinking and behaving are but "vehicles," temporary ride-alongs from which we will separate when traveling to the kingdom of heaven.

Days before the last day, the home page issued a definitive statement, "Our Position Against Suicide." A cleverly written document. Using the Higher Source web site, the Heaven's Gate cult members said, "We fully desire, expect, and look forward to boarding a spacecraft from the Next Level very soon (in our physical bodies)." What does that mean, given what we've just said about transformation prior to travel to the kingdom? The statement went on to say

⁷Although the Heaven's Gate home page is now defunct, at this writing a mirror site is located at <http://www.swmonster.com/bz-r/index.html>. I thank student Matthew Larson for helping me gather online material.

that some might "lose our physical bodies...before that spacecraft comes."

The statement then took an apocalyptic turn. It registered fear of attack from without. Citing Ruby Ridge and Waco along with the ancient suicide at Masada, the Heaven's Gate members saw themselves as potentially under siege. Perhaps like David Koresh in his Branch Davidian citadel near Waco, Texas, surrounded by heavily armed ATF warriors, Do's followers would similarly immolate themselves. What then? No bodies would remain to board the spacecraft. What could they mean by saying this?

The key sentence is this: "The true meaning of 'suicide' is to turn against the Next Level when it is being offered." Suicide here means just the opposite of what it means to the rest of us. To the Heaven's Gate cult suicide refers to daily living; it refers to family, sensuality, selfish desires, human thinking, and especially living in the human body. This is reminiscent of the ancient philosopher, Socrates, who was condemned to death by an Athens court. The method of execution was drinking poison, drinking hemlock. Socrates drank it willingly, comforting his friends by saying that at death his soul would be released from the prison of physical darkness and rise into the realm of philosophical light. He asked his friends: which is better, to die or to live? Perhaps dying is really living. So, in parallel fashion, for the Heaven's Gaters daily living is death. And when we choose not to follow Do, we choose death. Death—what most of us call suicide—becomes a choice for life, eternal life.

The Gnostic Redeemer Returns

Where does Do fit into all this? He makes it clear. He is a second Jesus Christ or, perhaps more accurately, a gnostic redeemer. I'll explain. In his home-page theology he describes God's incarnation in Jesus. He puts it this way: "Upon instruction, a member of the Kingdom of Heaven then left behind His body in that Next Level (similar to putting it in a closet, like a suit of clothes that doesn't need to be worn for a while), came to Earth, and moved into (or incarnated into) an adult human body (or 'vehicle')....The body that was chosen

was called Jesus." Does this imply more than one body, a physical body for this level (Jesus) plus another body at the Next Level (hung in a closet)? Do each of us have this two-body option? When we shed our human physical body, do we rise to the next level and receive a next-level body? Did Jesus reverse this direction? Is that how we explain the incarnation?

Two things are important in order to understand what is going on. First, the picture of Jesus Do paints is that of a gnostic redeemer. The word 'gnostic' here refers to someone who has knowledge—that is, esoteric or secret saving knowledge. In this picture, Jesus comes from the realm of light into our realm of darkness—that is, he comes from the world of knowledge into our world of ignorance—to show us the way to heaven. Note that this is an educational model of salvation. Jesus teaches. We learn. If we follow the teachings, we will transform ourselves and ready ourselves for salvation. We save ourselves through self-transformation. This educational or gnostic model differs qualitatively from the classic Christian view of Jesus Christ as savior, wherein our salvation is a gift to us from God's grace that we receive in faith. Yet, it is the gnostic model that is employed by Heaven's Gate.

The second important item is this: note where Do places himself. He places himself as the successor to Jesus. "I am in the same position to today's society as was the One that was in Jesus then." To follow Do is to follow Jesus. To follow Do is to rise to the next level where the next-level-body Jesus had left in the closet can be shared. This gives Do authority. Lots of authority. Do becomes the possessor of esoteric knowledge, the knowledge from above that each of us below needs if we are to rise to the next level. If we follow Do, we will be carried by a UFO to salvation. Do becomes our gnostic redeemer.

We know a couple of things about cults, things that distinguish cults from churches or synagogues or classical religious traditions. A cult is like a bicycle wheel. At the hub is the *axis mundi*, the center of the earth. The *axis mundi* is usually a person, a shamanlike person who claims to have gone to heaven (literally or figuratively) and gained the esoteric knowledge of salvation. The cult

leader is the center, because he or she is believed to have direct access to celestial truth. In this person or persons heaven and earth meet; and those of us who are disciples or adepts want to orient ourselves like bicycle spokes to this center.

The outer rim of the wheel is the border between those who are in and those who are out. Those who are in are oriented toward the light at the center; whereas all those outside are wandering aimlessly in darkness. Even members of families left behind are thought to be outside the wheel, maybe even beyond hope of salvation. Do (earlier in partnership with Ti) played the role of the shaman, the *axis mundi*. The claim that Do is the direct heir to Jesus, to the Jesus who had come down from the next level to be on our level, gave him ultimate authority and placed him at the center of the Heaven's Gate world.

Some scholars in the field of New Religious Movements shun the word 'cult' on the grounds that it sounds negative, perhaps even pejorative. I use it freely, even though I respect my colleagues in this field who do differently. Why do I use it here? Because cults can be distinguished in the way I just described; and because the Heaven's Gate group fits the oft repeated pattern. In addition, on videotaped messages Do described his own group as a cult, even a "dangerous cult." Higher Source was a danger to the traditional family, he said, because group members gave up their earthly families to come live within the wheel and to travel to a heavenly family, the Father's kingdom.

Shame and the Call of Destiny

The Heaven's Gate group a quarter-century earlier were followers of "The Two." This referred to two persons, Marshall Herff Applewhite and Bonnie Trusdale Nettles, both of Houston, Texas.⁸ Applewhite, nicknamed Herff, was the son of a Presbyterian minister and grew up to become a successful music teacher and director of college choral groups. In the early 1970s his life took a turn for the worse. Divorced from his wife at discovering he was bisexual, he went through a sexual-identity crisis. He vacillated between heterosexual and homosexual identities, never coming to

peace with either. How much initial shame was involved at this stage is not clear. But he did undergo the shame of public disgrace in 1970 when he was dismissed from his teaching position at the University of St. Thomas in Houston after a scandal over a homosexual relationship with a student. Then his father passed away in 1971. He was in debt. He was melancholy.

Bonnie Nettles née Trusdale had been raised Baptist yet dabbled in theosophy, astrology, and necromancy. She believed in a world filled with spirits, and one named Brother Francis—a long-dead monk—kept her continual company. After a wilting marriage of 23 years dried up in 1972, several fortune tellers told her that she was about to meet a mysterious man. She did.

The Two met in March 1972. As Herff remembered it, he was visiting a friend in a hospital when nurse Nettles walked in. As Bonnie remembered it, the first meeting took place in a drama school theater. Regardless of the place, when their eyes met it was Kismet. Not romantic, but mystical. They recognized each other as former friends in a previous life, in a previous incarnation. An astrological review confirmed for Bonnie that this was *the* man.

Herff had been looking for a person with access to the realm of spirits, so he thought, at least. He had a vision to interpret. While walking on a Galveston beach some months before, Herff thought he had been engaged by the Lord in a tutorial. Somewhat like Buddha under the tree of Enlightenment, he felt he'd been given the knowledge of where the human race had come from and where it would be going. Herff had been called, given a divinely appointed vocation. Could Bonnie help him understand? Yes, indeed.

They camped. While camping on the Oregon coast and meditating in July 1973, surrounded by wild iris and rhododendron, they felt together a sense of overwhelming mission. They decided they had been chosen to be the "two witnesses" prophesied in Revelation 11. This visionary passage pictures two advocates of God tormented and slain by the citizens of earth. Their dead bodies are left as refuse in the streets where they fell. Evil people on earth view the corpses, make merry, and exchange pre-

sents, so joyful are they over the slaying. Then, after three and a half days, they rise from the dead.

But after the three and a half days, a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and those who saw them were terrified. Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, "Come up here!" And they went up to heaven in a cloud while their enemies watched them. (Rev 11:11-12, NRSV)

A careful parsing of this biblical text is illuminating, because it reveals the fore-casted scenario. First, the ignominious death and resurrection is a repeat of what happened to Jesus Christ. The Two constitute a clone of Christ. Second, the voice from heaven is a call from God to come up, to come up to the next level that transcends earth, that transcends death. Third, they are snatched away to safety while their enemies—enemies referring to those living on earth with ordinary pleasures—watch in amazement and perhaps even envy (Rev 11:10). Fourth, the cloud is the ship of rescue. The Two identified the cloud with a UFO. On the original Ascension Day, it was a cloud—read UFO—that lifted Jesus up and carried him to heaven (Acts 1:9). Now, The Two could expect that the same would happen to them: the UFO cloud would, upon their resurrection from the dead, carry them off to heaven as it did Jesus. The gate to heaven, the gate to resurrection and to the UFO trip, would be death.⁹

As their theology began to take form,

⁸This background material derives from my own research plus the excellent work of Robert W. Balch, "Waiting for the Ships: Disillusionment and the Revitalization of Faith in Bo and Peep's UFO Cult," in *The Gods Have Landed*, ed. by James R. Lewis (Albany: SUNY, 1995) 137-166; and Barry Bearak, "Eyes on Glory: Pied Pipers of Heaven's Gate," *New York Times* (April 28, 1997) A1, B8-10.

⁹Brad Steiger and Hayden Hewes report a conversation with Applewhite and Nettles in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, that took place at International UFO Bureau headquarters on July 13, 1974. The Two said they would prove their emissary status to skeptics in a short time: they would be assassinated; their slain corpses would lie in state for three and a half days; and then they would rise from the dead in full view of the national media. *Inside Heaven's Gate* (New York: Penguin, Signet, 1997) xi. This new book is a revised edition of a previous work on Bo and Peep, *UFO Missionaries Extraordinary* (New York: Pocket Books, 1976).

they saw "the Father's kingdom" less as a spiritual dimension but more in terms of "literal heavens." The literalness indicates celestial geography, a location in outer space. The way to get there is to travel via spacecraft. Christian theologians with a high opinion of incarnation, according to which God enters the physical world, are used to chastising gnostics for their scorning of the physical in favor of the spiritual. Yet, the Heaven's Gate gnosticism seems to speak positively of the physical. What has happened is that life on planet earth, not physical life per se, has taken over the role in ancient gnosticism played by the physical realm of darkness from which we seek liberation.

According to the Heaven's Gate rewriting of cosmic and evolutionary history, the destiny of the human race began millions of years ago when members of the next level planted seeds of consciousness here on earth. Earth is a "garden" wherein these seeds of consciousness can grow. At this point in time, the earth garden is being readied for the harvest, possibly the last harvest. Harvest consists in departing from the poisoned atmosphere of earth that stunts the growth of consciousness by subjecting it to the endless cycle of death and reincarnation. Like jumping off the Hindu wheel of karma, earthlings who rise now to the next level could become immortal beings living in the Father's kingdom in a state of perpetual growth and fulfillment.

Also like Hinduism and New Age spirituality, The Two's teaching included monism. In the first of a series of 12 videotapes recorded just prior to departing from their body vehicles, Do said, "There is cosmic consciousness. There is a universal mind. And you, too, can have that universal mind. We're all gods. You can bring that universal mind in and you can be a god too."

Jesus Aboard a UFO

The Two contended that the human Jesus underwent a metamorphosis—

¹⁰See my earlier account in *UFOs—God's Chariots? Flying Saucers in Politics, Science, and Religion* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1977) 131-138.

what they for some years called Human Individual Metamorphosis or HIM—and gradually became aware that he had been incarnated and sent by the Father for a show-and-tell period on earth. Jesus was to tell earthlings that the kingdom of God can be entered now by denying our human proclivities and converting ourselves into new and resurrected creatures. By his own resurrection Jesus *showed* that death can be literally overcome and that the permanent body for the next kingdom is not a disembodied spirit but rather a transformed earthly body. After his Easter resurrection, Jesus had the capacity to change his molecular structure and to walk through walls. He could disappear and reappear at will. All this he did in a physical body through manipulation of vibrations. Once Jesus had converted the body he was born with into the new purified body, then a UFO came and transported him to heaven. The form the UFO took was that of a cloud at the ascension.

Applewhite and Nettles saw themselves as reincarnations of heavenly beings sent to restate the truth Jesus bore and to show again that any individual who truly seeks God's kingdom will find it through the same HIM process. The metamorphosis takes place within the term of our life on earth. It does not require death. "Resurrection" simply signifies that a human being has left the kingdom of humanity and entered the kingdom of God. Whenever you are ready, the UFO will pick you up and taxi you to that kingdom, which is located somewhere in outer space.

In the event that you are killed, however, your efforts would not have been in vain. Once having passed through the metamorphosis, death can no longer hold you down. This happened to Jesus; and he rose from the dead. The Two, identifying themselves with the two lampstands in Revelation 11, predicted this of themselves. Not everyone need follow the path through physical death; but all must take their metamorphosed physical bodies to heaven.

While researching my first book on this topic during the mid-1970s, I communicated with The Two discipleship. I asked them to explain in more detail the relationship between resurrection and UFOs. In a letter to me they ex-

plained that "cloud" in the Bible was the term for UFO. Then they emphasized the corporeal nature of our resurrected bodies.

Christ stated that he was flesh and bone, not spirit (Luke 24:38-39). It is necessary to enter the kingdom of heaven with a physical body, one that has been transformed as the body of Christ had been transformed. His transformation was completed at the transfiguration.

Our bodies must likewise be changed. We too must overcome the world and leave this planet in a cloud of light or UFO if we would enter the kingdom of Heaven. This is not to say that ones who died in the past have been lost, for they have not. It is to say that the time is now, if you wish to go.¹⁰

The Two and their disciples were correct in recognizing that Jesus' physical body actually underwent resurrection from death. It became a spiritual body (*soma pneumatikon*). But we must note in the Heaven's Gate interpretation the startling emphasis on what is physical. Why? This undue emphasis on the physical almost to the denigration of the spiritual makes this religious view distinctly modern. The modern worldview with its scientific interpretation of nature can no longer accept the reality of disembodied spirit. The reality of God must be fitted within the reality of the natural world, and this means the physical world. The Two insist that the kingdom of God is what they call a "real" kingdom just like the mineral kingdom, the plant kingdom, and the animal kingdom. UFO theology wants the elusive transcendence of spirit but in terms of the secure form of the physical body.

Bo and Peep

Applewhite and Nettles began a shared autobiography by calling themselves a series of code names such as Him and Her, He and She, Guinea and Pig, Bo and Peep, and finally Do and Ti. "Bo and Peep" fitted them nicely, seeing themselves as space-age shepherds herding their flock to celestial pasture.

The Two became a community in April 1975 when 80 people crowded into the house of Los Angeles psychic Joan Culpepper, where they had been invited by her friend Clarence Klug. Mrs.

Culpepper described her entourage of guests that evening as *seekers*—whom we would later call “New Age”—persons “trying to find themselves” through Scientology, yoga, Zen, hallucinogens, hypnosis, tarot cards, and astrology. The Two talked. Guinea and Pig told their listeners that within months a UFO would take away those who would be ready to live in a new and better world. Twenty-seven prospective space voyagers signed up. Judi Rowland of Ventura, California, left a husband and two children, Cindy, 8, and Joey, 6. Her husband Bob said he was angry and that he wanted her back, although he went ahead and filed for divorce. Bob Rowland reported that Judi had been deeply involved in religion just prior to her departure, getting baptized three times. Mrs. Rowland’s body was numbered among the dead 22 years later in Rancho Santa Fe.

Recruitment proceeded rapidly during the mid-1970s. Because the drop-out rate was so fast, the total membership never got much above 200. Two social scientists who infiltrated the group, Robert Balch and David Taylor, described the recruits: “Most of them had been searching for self-awareness, looking for ways to become more open, more loving, more human.”¹¹

During the early camp years, Bo and Peep demonstrated that they did not know how to form a cult or how to keep discipline within the ranks. No school for becoming an *axis mundi* exists, so taking the reins over people’s souls and solidifying group morale became a trial and error path toward consolidation. To prevent defections, The Two took drastic action.

To consolidate their shamanic authority, they announced that no one other than The Two would be receiving any direct revelations from the higher source. They explained that all knowledge gained about the next level would be channeled through a “chain of mind,” a chain in which Bo and Peep would be the chief links. The only valid revelations would be given by the Father directly to Peep and Bo; and then it would be dispersed to their followers.

In addition to establishing the authority of knowledge, Bo and Peep created a structure and enforced strict

rules for community conformity and individual interiority. The regimentation included wearing uniform clothing. Time was tightly controlled with schedules for cooking and bathing and sleeping. Everyone was assigned a partner to keep tabs on eating, sleeping, and working. Required were written accounts of each member’s inner thoughts and feelings including a “spirit list” describing the earthly influences they still needed to overcome.

Sex was forbidden. Doing it. Thinking it. Dreaming it. Like Hindus and Buddhists and ancient Stoics, the discipline aimed at eliminating desire. Some, at least eight, eventually had themselves castrated, including Applewhite. This recalled words apparently spoken by Jesus speaking positively about those “who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 19:12). It may have recalled as well Applewhite’s own sense of sexual shame.

Sexlessness took the form of androgyny. Uniform dress diminished the visual differences between the genders. Men and women were equal, undifferentiated. This seemed to fit St. Paul’s vision of unity and equality in Christ wherein there is no difference between Jew or Greek, slave or free; and, of course, “there is no longer male and female, for all are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).

Fear and shame kept a tight ship. The ultimate enforcement was threat of expulsion. When members were asked to leave, Bo and Peep bought their plane tickets home.

In 1979 the flock moved from campground living to Wheaton, Colorado, and into their first of many indoor residences. The group moved every six months or so. Some members took jobs. Each morning each worker would leave with exactly \$5.00 for spending money and \$.25 for a phone call. Every penny had to be accounted for.

In 1985 Nettles, now named Ti, died of liver cancer in Parkland Hospital in Dallas. Herff mourned her passing, though took comfort in believing that she had passed to the next level in advance. Do then referred to her as his “Older Member.” Just as a Hindu adept follows a master teacher, and just as

Jesus followed the direction of the heavenly Father, Do dutifully followed Ti.

By 1988 the group was beginning to emerge from obscurity by sending mailings to New Age centers and health food stores. In 1993, now with 24 members and taking on a new name, Total Overcomers Anonymous, the group ran a full page advertisement in *USA Today* saying, “UFO Cult Resurfaces with Final Offer.” It carried a sense of apocalyptic urgency: “The Earth’s civilization is about to be recycled—spaded under. Its inhabitants are refusing to evolve. The weeds have taken over the garden and disturbed its usefulness beyond repair.”¹² A nationwide recruiting program netted new members. At the time of the suicide in March 1997 the group, now named Heaven’s Gate, was running the Higher Source Contract Enterprises computer consulting business out of their rented home in Rancho Santa Fe, California.

Hailing Hale-Bopp

On July 23, 1995 the earth woke up to a new visitor headed in our planet’s direction, the comet Hale-Bopp. It was named in honor of the first two to sight it: Alan Hale of the Southwest Institute for Space Research in Cloudcroft, New Mexico, and Thomas Bopp, an amateur astronomer in Glendale, Arizona. Analysis of this exceptionally active comet by the Hubble Space Telescope indicated that the effective diameter of the nucleus was between 27 and 42 kilometers, making it three times larger than Halley’s Comet.¹³ When it finally became visible to the naked eye in late winter 1997, it sparkled and dazzled and pleased its terrestrial audience.

Already in late 1996 a number of UFO-oriented religious groups began to speculate that in the tail of this comet might be flying a companion, a UFO. This was prompted by an initial talk-

¹¹Robert Balch and David Taylor, “Salvation in a UFO,” *Psychology Today* (October 1976) 61.

¹²Cited by Balch, “Waiting for the Ships,” 163.

¹³H.A. Weaver, et. al., “The Activity and Size of the Nucleus of Comet Hale-Bopp (C/1995 O1),” *Science* 275/5308 (28 March 1997) 1900-1904.

show report by an amateur astronomer in Houston, Chuck Shramek, that he had sighted and photographed a mysterious object hovering behind the comet. Astronomers directed their attention to the claim and said that the alleged companion was merely a distant star distorted by the optics of the telescope. The existence of a Hale-Bopp spaceship could not be confirmed.

¹⁴Upon seeing what apparently ludicrous things were being said on the web, I forwarded the material via email to Vatican Observatory director George Coyne, S.J., and astronomers William Stoeger, S.J., and Christopher Corbely, S.J. After the laughter died down they assured me that the pope was not monitoring the path of Hale-Bopp nor expecting any divine epiphany associated with it. The Vatican Observatory is a scientific research organization, yet it becomes an easy target for paranoid imaginations that propel themselves out of rational control.

¹⁵News coverage included Elizabeth Gleick, "The Marker We've Been Waiting For," *Time* 149/14 (April 7, 1997) 28-37; Evan Thomas, et. al., "Web of Death," *Newsweek* CXXIX/14 (April 7, 1997) 26-39; Stephen J. Hedges, "www.masssuicide.com," *U.S. News and World Report* 122/13 (April 7, 1997) 26-30; "Who They Were," *People* 47/14 (April 14, 1997) 40-56.

¹⁶The names and ages of the 21 women and 19 men are as follows: Dana Tracey Abreo, 35; Marshall Herff Applewhite, 65; Robert John Arancio, 46; Raymond Alan Bowers, 45; LaDonna Ann Brugato, 40; Margaret June Bull, 53; Cheryl Elaine Butcher, 43; Michael Howard Carrier, 48; Wayne "Nick" Cooke, 54; Suzanne Sylvia Cooke, 54; John "Mickie" Craig, 63; Betty Eldrie Deal, 64; Erika Ernst, 40; Alphonzo Ricardo Foster, 44; Lawrence Jackson Gale, 47; Darwin Lee Johnson, 42; Julie LaMontagne, 45; Jacqueline Opal Leonard, 72; Jeffrey Howard Lewis, 41; Gail Renee Maeder, 28; Steven Terry McCarter, 41; Joel Peter McCormick, 29; Yvonne McCurdy-Hill, 39; David Jeffrey Moore, 41; Nancy Dianne Nelson, 45; Norma Jeane Nelson, 59; Thomas Alva Nichols, 59; Lindley Ayerhart Pease, 41; Lucy Eva Pesho, 63; Susan Elizabeth Nora Paup, 54; Margaret Ella Richter, 46; Judith Ann Rowland, 50; Michael Barr Sandoe, 26; Brian Alan Schaaf, 40; Joyce Angela Skalla, 58; Gary Jordan St. Louis, 44; Susan Frances Strom, 44; Denise June Thurman, 44; David Cabot van Sinderen, 48; and Gordon Thomas Welch, 50.

¹⁷William Henry, *The Keepers of Heaven's Gate: The Religion Behind the Rancho Santa Fe Suicides* (Anchorage: Earthpulse Press, 1997) 2.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁹Budd Hopkins, "The UFO Phenomenon and the Suicide Cults—An Ideological Study," *MUFON 1997 International UFO Symposium Proceedings* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, July 11-13, 1997) 250.

Nevertheless, the worldwide web became electric with speculations regarding the possible religious significance of this heavenly portent. The speculations included paranoia of sinister plots on the part of the pope, who allegedly knew of Hale-Bopp's significance and was tracking it with the help of the Vatican Observatory while denying any hand in deciphering the omen.¹⁴ Nothing was too outlandish, too bizarre, to associate with this approaching apparition.

Among the speculators was Do, Marshall Herff Applewhite. This was the omen he had been waiting for, he told his followers. The UFO hidden in the tail of Hale-Bopp would be heaven's chariot coming to get them. Although a quarter-century earlier he had forecasted that it would only be a few months, he could make that same forecast again. This time the waiting would be accompanied by action. The UFO would not have to touch ground. Just come close, within 100 million miles. It would come the closest about the first day of spring. The gap would be filled by traveling in their metamorphosed bodies from planet earth to the boarding ramp in the comet's tail. Earthly death would be the gate to heaven.

On March 26, 1997 the earth woke up to reports of 39 persons traveling through Heaven's Gate to board Hale-Bopp's companion spaceship. Marshall Herff Applewhite along with 38 disciples were found dead in their rented Rancho Santa Fe home. Each reposed body was laid out neatly dressed in black pants, flowing black shirt, brand new Nike shoes; and their faces were covered by purple shrouds. Next to each corpse were personal effects such as glasses, identification papers, and the \$5.25 customarily taken on each day's journey. The waste baskets were emptied, and the house was neat and clean as if in obedience to Isaiah's command, "Set your house in order, for you shall die..." (Isaiah 38:1). Analysis showed that the suicide potion consisted of phenobarbital mixed with vodka; and death was assured by adding a plastic bag over the head causing asphyxiation. The assisted suicides came in three groups in sequence. The final two human angels of death had no one to put purple shrouds over their faces.¹⁵

Missing his wife, Suzanne Sylvia

Cooke, who went with Do and the group in the original departure, grieving husband Wayne "Nick" Cooke joined her by taking his life on May 6, 1997. Cooke's cult companion, Charles Humphrey, also attempted suicide but failed. He lived. So, the death toll at this writing is 40.¹⁶

Anger at the Dead

One of the surprising dimensions of the aftermath is the expression of anger against those who killed themselves. The anger seems to arise from a need for self-cleansing, almost as if what the Heaven's Gate people did to themselves defiles the rest of us. The suicides seem to have defiled UFO belief in general, so that proponents need to distance themselves in order to justify continuing their belief systems.

William Henry, who wants to preserve the good name of gnosticism, says "It's okay to believe in UFOs, reincarnation, and life on other planets."¹⁷ What's not okay, he says, is to take these beliefs so seriously that they lead to suicide. "The point is, the search for heaven is real. It gives lives meaning. It makes life interesting. The idea that we can discover everlasting life, joy, love, friendship and attain ultimate knowledge while on Earth is an addictive passion for thousands. For 39 former Californians it was a just plain stupid idea."¹⁸

Alien abduction expert Budd Hopkins provides another example. Speaking at the 1997 MUFON Symposium on the topic, "The UFO Phenomenon and the Suicide Cults—an Ideological Study," Hopkins tried to marginalize the Rancho Santa Fe group in order to preserve the reputation of good healthy UFO fascination. With none of the Heaven's Gate members present to defend their beliefs, Hopkins waxed vitriolic against the earth-denying and heaven-affirming teachings of Applewhite. Hopkins took umbrage at what he described as Applewhite's pessimism, accusing the latter "of devouring anger against one's fellow human beings and against life itself."¹⁹ Hopkins opposed the celestial savior element in the UFO myth, describing himself as "spiritually committed to humanistic val-

ues."²⁰ Hopkins hinted that this is an ideological difference he has with a belief system he simply disdains. Near the end of his address he offered advice that I believe is worth repeating: "the elusive, unapproachable world of the UFO occupants can be neither trusted nor relied upon."²¹

Are UFOs Religious?

To understand such events, we need much more than merely the anger of those who want to protect their respective belief systems and also more than what the journalists report. We need an analysis that begins with a pre-understanding of religious sensibilities. We need to plummet more deeply into the human psyche and soul than unsophisticated journalists who are satisfied with the most superficial reporting. Of particular embarrassment is the Staff of the *New York Post* who, after citing The Two's theology of resurrection, describe it as "mumbo jumbo."²² On the other hand, journalism one could be proud of can be found in the work of Kenneth L. Woodward who, in parsing Do's theology, looks for roots of millennial urgency in the New Testament; recognizes in the body-denying anthropology ancient gnosticism; notes how the idea of implanted souls resembles Mormonism; asks if Do's sci-fi picture of the universe comes from Scientology; and compares the sense of cyclical time with that of Hinduism and Buddhism.²³ Comparing religious ideas provides a good start. Yet, we need to go further. To understand Heaven's Gate—and to understand better how certain religious sensibilities come to expression in our wider culture—we need to pursue a phenomenology of UFOs in conjunction with a theological critique.

A *Christian Century* op-ed column puts us on the right track. "But at least since the time of the first flying saucer craze of the early 1950s, interest in UFOs has been closely tied to matters of spirituality."²⁴ This is the right track because intuitively we are aware that mysterious craft seen in the sky carry on board religious luggage. The question we now ask is: Why?

This is because the UFO phenomenon is intrinsically a religious phenom-

non. This is difficult to see at first because the religious dimensions are so mixed in with scientific vocabulary and technological images. In order to ferret out the spiritual dimensions, we need to treat UFOs as a phenomenon—that is, we need to look at how they are perceived. Our word 'phenomenon' comes from the Greek *phaino*, which refers to how something appears to us. So, here we are not going to ask simply about UFOs as objects in themselves. We are not going to ask strictly journalists' questions such as: Are UFOs real? Who is right, the skeptics or the believers? Do UFOs really bring extraterrestrial passengers and do they really come from outer space? These are worthy questions, to be sure. But even if we could answer these questions, we would still not be able to understand Heaven's Gate nor understand the wider impact strange lights seen in the sky have been having on our culture and on our psyches. So, to get at the more subtle dimensions we need to treat UFOs as a phenomenon. This means we must look at the connection between what is seen and our seeing, what is perceived and our perceiving, the objective reality and our subjective interpretation.

When we do this we find UFOs by accident or design have tapped into deep sensibilities within the human psyche. Like Pavlov's dogs, the flying saucer stimulus has elicited a religious response in our culture; and individual "true believers" are usually persons who have ideologized and interiorized this cultural response. Something within us wants to attribute certain qualities to these mysteries of the sky.

The UFO Myth as Scientized Religion

In 1959 psychologist Carl Jung designated flying saucers as a "modern myth of things seen in the sky."²⁵ A UFO myth in the form of a conceptual set of associated ideas may have arisen as early as the late 1940s; but it certainly was in place by the time of the first authentic UFO movie in 1951, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. The backbone of the myth is the technological belief in progress and the scientific theory of evolution. The rib cage includes the relig-

ious qualities of transcendence, omniscience, perfection, and redemption. The skin covering the skeleton is our culture which puts its faith in science.

What do I mean by the backbone of progress and evolution? First, the modern world is saturated with technology and its accompanying belief in technological progress. New inventions mean new machines, and new machines mean better living. We are acutely time conscious, future conscious. The future will be better than the present, because technological advance will make it better.

Second, a variant on the doctrine of progress is evolution. The scientific theory of evolution was formulated in the nineteenth century while the industrial revolution was evoking time conscious-

²⁰*Ibid.*, 253.

²¹*Ibid.*, 256. Hopkins' watershed book is *Intruders* (New York: Ballantine, 1987).

²²*Heaven's Gate Cult Suicide in San Diego*, by the Staff of the *New York Post* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997) 117. This book flippantly throws up a homosexual hypothesis as an explanation: "Was his [Do's] lifelong lust for men—his guilt over it—the ultimate reason for the castrations and eventually the mass suicide?" (72). No doubt the sexual ambivalence of Applewhite and perhaps of Nettles influenced their demeanor, just as sexual drives to greater or lesser degree influence every one of us. The question is whether we can reduce every aspect of this extraordinary event to such a simple explanation. I think not. Those choosing suicide did so because they believed firmly in a set of theological ideas that made this act seem plausible. Among other things, this calls for a patient analysis of these ideas.

²³Kenneth L. Woodward, "Christ and Comets," *Newsweek* CXXIX/14 (April 7, 1997) 40-42.

²⁴Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe, "UFO Religion," *The Christian Century* 114/15 (May 7, 1997) 439. Hexham and Poewe are correct that UFOs and spiritual matters have been closely connected right from the beginning. However, in the article cited here, they mistakenly connect the UFO phenomenon with the science fiction genre in literature. There is almost no connection, in my judgment. The sci-fi genre of the 1950s followed the Orson Welles "War of the Worlds" model that pictured interplanetary and intergalactic warfare. The UFO phenomenon, in sharp contrast, worked out of a model of technological and moral progress wherein more advanced space visitors coming to earth were not enemies but benevolent benefactors if not potential saviors.

²⁵Carl Jung, *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Sky*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge, Kegan Paul, 1959).

UFO Transcendence

ness and prospects of a future different from, and better than, the present. Evolutionary theory looks back over millions and billions of years to reconstruct the history of biological developments, to identify the genetic and environmental factors that gave rise to new species. Scientists engaging in primary research in the field of evolutionary biology work without a teleology—that is, they do not try to find purpose in nature and, hence, are unable to locate progress in nature. Species appear and disappear. That's all. However, what the research scientists believe and what the wider culture believes about science differ somewhat. The wider culture assumes that progress exists in nature just as it does in technology. 'To evolve' in popular parlance is to improve, to advance. This becomes decisive for the UFO myth. Recall the Heaven's Gate vocabulary: the "Level Above the Human" is also called the "Next Evolutionary Level."

As the conceptual set through which we interpret anomalous sightings of heavenly objects with a possible origin in outer space grows, we construct an image of an extraterrestrial civilization and impute to it progress and evolution. We conjecture: the extraterrestrials must be more advanced than we, especially if they can fly here when we cannot fly there. We conjecture further: they must be older than we and, therefore, further evolved than we in order to be ahead of us. In effect, they are our future coming back to us. To them we look like a stage in their past, a primitive stage they have surpassed. Because they have already evolved to a better life, their visits to us could benefit us. They could be coming to earth to share with us fruits of their progress and evolution. They could be coming to earth to protect us from the dark side of science and technology, from ecological disaster and nuclear war. They could be coming to earth to save us. They could be our celestial saviors.

²⁶Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: Meridian, 1963) 39; cf. his *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1959) 118f.

If technological progress and the scientific theory of evolution constitute the backbone of the UFO myth, then at least four religious ribs are worth counting: transcendence, omniscience, perfection, and redemption. Of these four the first one, transcendence, is the most important. It is the key to understanding the other three and to understanding the religious energy that propels the UFO phenomenon in our otherwise scientific and technological culture.

UFOs convey the sense of transcendence because of their association with the sky, with heaven, with the mathematical infinity of outer space. Infinity fills us with a sense of awe and holiness.

The "high" is something inaccessible to us mortals as such. Thus the heavenly realms so far beyond our reach become invested with the divine majesty of the transcendent, of absolute reality, of everlastingness. Heaven naturally belongs to superhuman powers and beings. Mircea Eliade wrote, "even before any religious values have been set upon the sky it reveals its transcendence. The sky 'symbolizes' transcendence, power and changelessness simply by being there. It exists because it is high, infinite, immovable, powerful."²⁶

Despite all of this, of course, we modern people endowed with the scientific approach to reality have fooled ourselves into believing that we need not think of the sky as holy. We humans have conquered the sky. We watch the evening news for the weather report. No matter how frequently the forecast for our sky may turn out to be wrong, we continue to think that the heavens are not capricious but rather subject to human calculation and prediction. In addition, we have built subsonic and even supersonic jet passenger planes that cruise about at will, as if the heavens had become our own backyard. What was the holy heaven for premodern people has shrunk in our modern consciousness. We now think of the sky as a thin envelope of atmosphere containing our little earth. We cannot believe in gods like Zeus or the Father of Jesus if they rule

such a puny and vulnerable heaven as our local atmosphere.

However, just as we moderns thought we had conquered the sky, something unexpected happened. Another sky appeared behind the first one, namely, outer space. The virtual infinity of outer space was hiding in the darkness, and once revealed it engulfed us once again in an even more awesome realm of transcendence. The commonly used adjective 'astronomical' connotes the mind-boggling mathematics that accompany our awareness of the immense and unconquerable distances which separate galaxy from galaxy, which separate us from the rest of reality. Outer space provides a new sense of infinity, a new sense of our minuteness and dependence upon what is so much greater.

This is where the UFO picks up its religious baggage, where it begins to bear the message of transcendence. In the popular mind, belief in flying saucers is almost synonymous with belief in extraterrestrial and even extrasolar visitation. A subtle or covert logic is at work. We believe that beings capable of traversing such unfathomable distances are not simply slightly more advanced technologically than we are. No, they are radically more advanced. We in effect rank such beings with Zeus or Thor. The UFO has mastered the sky, conquered infinity. The UFO is mysterious and majestic. It humbles us by reminding us of our earthbound limitations, of our inadequacies, of our finitude.

UFO Omniscience, Perfection, and Redemption

Omniscience is also a UFO carry-on. In ancient theological vocabulary, 'omniscience' referred to the all-knowing mind of God. God from eternity knows all things. Nothing escapes the divine view. This divine knowledge, of course, is more than merely factual knowledge about what is going on in the creation. It also includes wisdom, sublime wisdom. God is wise, supremely wise; and out of this knowledge and wisdom God cares for us, knows what is best for us. God knows us better than we know ourselves, asserted St. Augustine.

In our modern era we have difficulty

accepting such premodern beliefs. We no longer trust religious insight; rather we trust scientific knowledge. True knowledge is empirical or factual knowledge, we assume. True knowledge tells us how nature works and how to make our machines work. This is the kind of knowledge the pilots of UFOs must have, we surmise. They must have more engineering knowledge than NASA and Nissan combined. They must have more knowledge than the whole human race on earth. With this transcendent knowledge, the line between a quantitatively larger amount of technological knowledge and a qualitatively sublime divine wisdom vanishes. Functionally they're the same. The inventors of UFOs are, relative to us earthlings, all-knowing.

Perfection is the next quality ascribed to UFOS. Reports in the 1950s depicted faithfully in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, where a shiny flying saucer lands on the White House lawn in Washington, presume unfathomable technological advance.²⁷ Close inspection of the construction of such spacecraft reveals that no seams between parts can be discerned, no rivets or screws or weld tracings. When doors close, the line for the door jam disappears. Parts fit together perfectly, invisibly. This is an engineer's dream. It is technological perfection. Could these craft be bringing us other forms of perfection as well? Could they bring us perfect health? An advanced morality? The chance for peace on earth?

Omniscience and perfection lead to the final quality in our list, redemption. The masters of the UFOs certainly have the power and knowledge to make life on earth better, to stimulate a human frog-leap into a better future. The message delivered to earthlings by flying saucer pilots in the 1950s indicated that they were coming from an advanced civilization which had put an end to warfare; and they were coming to earth to help prevent the human race from destroying itself through atomic war and radioactive fallout. This is planetary redemption. Personal redemption could be a variant on the theme, insofar as the spacelings might bring medical technology so advanced as to insure perfect health or, failing that, resurrection from the dead.

Two decades before The Two began recruiting, the conceptual framework for a scientized UFO religion had been culturally constructed. Applewhite and Nettles had plenty of materials with which to build their redemptive worldview. Jacques Vallee reports how disciples of The Two told him that no other system had better integrated the concept of survival of death and the belief in UFOs. This led Vallee in 1979 to observe that "the doctrine of H.I.M. is a genuine prototype for some future religion....Although I consider the beliefs of The Two to be childish fabrications, the fact remains that they have touched a sensitive nerve."²⁸ The sensitive nerve is the religious nerve beneath the scientific epidermis. Barbara Smith-Moran, who directs the Faith and Science Exchange, observes that "the Heaven's Gate Christians embraced a set of beliefs pieced inventively together from the string and button box of popular culture" that reveals how "science and faith do interact, and in ways that compel our attention."²⁹

God's Grace and Our Belief

Some beliefs are worth dying for. It would dishonor the dead at Heaven's Gate to suggest that they should have been less committed, less zealous. It would be a cheap shot to suggest that they should have held a different set of beliefs, beliefs that would have encouraged them to live instead of die. Yet, one cannot help but ask: Isn't there something amiss here? Without imposing judgment on Heaven's Gate from afar, we need to ask: What constitutes a healthy theological outlook?

The problem here theologically is not that scientific vocabulary such as the "Next Evolutionary Level" is present. Nor is it that their worldview is filled with UFOs. Nor even that The Two required such total commitment that their followers gave up their secular lives. The problem is that, despite the reliance on the Bible, the message of God's grace seems garbled and distorted. What is at stake in true religion is not finally the authority of any given teacher or adherence to some church's dogma. Rather, what is at stake is whether or not the truth of God comes through;

whether or not God can use what we believe in a life-giving and life-transforming way. Authentic belief in the true God ought to result in joyful living. It ought to be life-giving.

The net effect of hearing what Christians believe to be the gospel—namely, that through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ God gives us forgiveness and the promise of everlasting life—is freedom. God's graciousness here frees us from the embarrassment of feeling that we are not good enough, from fearing our own inborn desires and inclinations, from worry that we are not acceptable as we are. We are free to be human, free to be ourselves. We are free to accept ourselves with our limitations, our finitude. We are free to accept our own impending death. And with all of our limitations, we are free to love one another with abandon, with uninhibited attention to what another person needs to make his or her life better. True freedom is the freedom to love. With this freedom comes a deep sense of joy in the middle of the mundane, ordinary, day-to-day living with family, work, and the stresses of human relationships. Such is the effect of God's grace in our lives, when the message gets through.

The God of grace is truly transcendent, transcending our religious energies, our scientific worldview, UFOs, and even the vast reaches of outer space. God is beyond. But God is also intimate, closer to us than we are to ourselves. In this closeness, God loves us. The difficulty in our contorted age is this: How can the message get through?

²⁷The second authentic UFO movie was Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, 1977.

²⁸Jacques Vallee, *Messengers of Deception: UFO Contacts and Cults* (Berkeley: And/Or Press, 1979) 75, 79.

²⁹Barbara Smith-Moran, *FASE Notices 8/9* (May 1997), available from The Center for Faith and Science Exchange, 93 Anson Rd., Concord MA 01742.