

## The Search for Heaven's Gate Falls Short

In the 1970s a mysterious couple calling themselves Bo and Peep, or simply "the Two," became the objects of news coverage. The couple's real names were Marshall Herff Applewhite, son of a Texas minister with a multifarious career, and Bonnie Lu Trusdale Nettles, a nurse. Their claim to fame was the proclamation of coming doom and catastrophe for the earth. Escape and eternal life was for those who would abandon friends and family, sell all material possessions, and prepare for a great astral trip. True believers would be transported to a spacecraft where they would experience accelerated spiritual advancement into higher forms elsewhere in the universe. Bo and Peep believed themselves to be the Two Witnesses prophesied in the book of Revelation to prepare the way for the kingdom of heaven. Nettles' daughter Terry said that when her mother knew she was dying of cancer in 1985 she had written her that "the time was coming close and coming to a point where they were leaving... that she would be transported by a UFO:"

Bo and Peep, later called "Do" and "Ti" (musical notes), intertwined science fiction, New Age symbols, ancient belief systems, Christianity, a fascination with UFOs, and modern technology as a basis for their faith. Sociologists Robert Balch and David Taylor who joined the cult covertly, reported that the typical member was a person who had already dabbled in or tried out various occult and unconventional philosophies.

After the death of Nettles the small cult became more apocalyptic in their beliefs. A reporter, who interviewed five cult members in 1994, said its members' one vice was science fiction. He recalls that, "They loved The X-files, and they loved Star Trek: The Next Generation. It was the only time they really brightened up and came alive. They just lit up. We had a long conversation about which Star Trek was better, the old one or the new,,

On March 22, 1997, Applewhite and his 38 followers committed suicide at Rancho Sante Fe, California, in the belief that an alien spaceship was riding behind the Hale-Bopp comet to give them their voyage to salvation. This spaceship would pick them up, but only if they were dead. The cult with its own web site called "Heaven's Gate," left suicide notes and videotapes documenting their decision to leave life.

Talk of UFOs (Unidentified Flying Objects) and the possibility of extraterrestrials originated in the late 1940s when people around the world began to report sightings of flying saucers. In the 1970s and 1980s an increasing number of people in the United States and around the world claimed to have been abducted by space aliens. Back in the 1950s people did not take UFOs seriously. By 1990 some 14 percent of Americans claimed to have seen a UFO. And today, there is more openness than ever to the idea that our planet is actually being visited by extraterrestrials.

Applewhite and Nettles were not the only ones intrigued by UFOs and to have them as a core of their religious belief. Interest in UFOs revived various forms of astral religion. A British man, Dr. George King, with a history of involvement in psychic activity, Eastern

mysticism, and traditional spiritualism, founded the Autherius Society. He claimed in 1954 to have been chosen by the "Cosmic Intelligence" to be their "Primary Terrestrial Channel" for significant messages they were about to transmit to the earth. After a successful lecture tour in the United States, he took up residence in California.

Some Christians are also fascinated by UFOs. They point to the Biblical warning that in the end times" there will be great signs from heaven" (Luke 21:11). Some claim that the vision in Ezekiel 1 is an account of UFOs. Others even suggest that a percentage of UFOs are "chariots of the Lord's hosts." Others even wonder whether the pre-millennial rapture of the saints will take place when living Christians board flying saucers and are taken to be with the Lord. Evangelical cult watcher Bob Larson muses whether UFOs are demonic in origin and that perhaps they "are reeducating mankind to accept a casual familiarity with paranormal activity; a process which will be completed under the reign of the Antichrist."

Why this fascination with UFOs and extraterrestrials? Why were 39 Heaven Gate cult members willing to pay the ultimate price for their beliefs, and seek immortality through suicide? It is tempting to put the blame on the influence of the internet, the movie industry the appearance of the Hale Bopp comet, and the compelling personality of Applewhite. And it is true that weird ad cults have been around a long time. The 1978 mass suicide of the People's Temple in Guyana, the tragedy of the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, and the recent suicides of five members of the Order of the Solar Temple in St.Casimir, Quebec, are prime examples.

Why do people join these groups? Why did the strange beliefs of Applewhite attract a dedicated following? These people revealed a desperate spiritual hunger and a need for the bonds of a close community.

Should the American and Canadian public be surprised by the rise of sects and cults? No. At a time when freedom is the rallying cry, religion is being suppressed. Society confuses freedom of religion with freedom from religion. Consequently, the public square is void of faith.

By nature people are incurably religious. They want meaning in life. And in our age of individualism they are looking for a sense of community. North America is starved for religion.

Two basic lessons can be drawn from the Heaven's Gate tragedy. First, it challenges the church to be a living, witnessing, and welcoming community of Christ-believers, which refuses to dilute the Gospel. Second, Satan "masquerades as an angel of light" (2 Cor.11:14). Our Lord warned us to be on guard for false prophets and religious deception. "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves" (Matth. 7:15).

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