

the cult is to try to cut followers off from all outside influences, he said. Professionals and family members should try to build from wherever they stand, while recognizing that extremists cannot be argued out of their beliefs. Even though some members of Heaven's Gate who killed themselves left behind children and families, they lacked ties that held them to the world. As one said in a videotaped final testament, "there's nothing here for me."

The more knowledge primary care physicians have about cultic behavior, the better able they will be to respond to patients who bring the subject up, whether cult members or their families, Lifton said in an interview. Although a

family member may request that a cult member be certified for psychiatric hospitalization on the basis of possible harm to self or others, "it's hard enough to certify a person up close," Lifton said. "It's impossible to certify a person from a distance." Physicians should advise relatives to stay in touch and invite the cult member to come in and talk, he suggested, and should emphasize that the physician is not an agent of the family or the cult.

Persons who come out of a cult undergo a tremendous psychological struggle, he noted. They must reconcile 2 separate universes. The cult gave them a powerful experience of living, with seeming intimacy and a transcendence not experienced elsewhere. Therapists

who work with such people need to know about cult behavior, not just about psychotherapy. An understanding spouse or parent, Lifton said, can be a critical support.

Lifton urged physicians and others to look critically at the vast societal dislocations that prompt extreme behavior. "We have to be critics of our society, not mere defenders of it, or mere labelers," he asserted. "We need to ask why the people in Heaven's Gate saw the world as dead, as though the apocalypse had already happened. Is there something in our society, not only in them, that led to that sense of deadness?"

—by Lynne Lamberg,
JAMA contributor

Belief in Alien UFOs Deep in American Psyche

BELEAGUERED astrophysicists are all too familiar with UFO theories like the one that figured in the suicides of 39 members of the Heaven's Gate cult in March.

At Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Md, site of the Space Telescope Science Institute that operates the Hubble Space Telescope, Hal Weaver, PhD, found his e-mail this spring peppered with inquiries about Comet Hale-Bopp. Some writers accused Weaver, a research scientist in the Department of Physics and Astronomy, with conspiring to withhold Hubble images of UFOs accompanying the comet. "Most were very angry," Weaver said in an interview. Some, however, felt that he was being coerced into suppressing data and told him he would be in their prayers.

Replying that he saw no evidence for UFOs or other paranormal activities associated with Hale-Bopp, Weaver said, "usually only opened the floodgates for more." Readers will find Hubble's images at <http://www.stsci.edu>.

'Dragons and Giants'

"People used to see dragons and giants," astronomer Olivier Hainaut, PhD, noted in an interview. "Now they see UFOs and aliens." Comets always provoke end-of-the-world predictions, said Hainaut, a postdoctoral fellow at the Institute for Astronomy of the University of Hawaii, Honolulu. "Hale-Bopp was a hot comet in terms of fringe thinking," he added, because its appearance was announced long in advance and came near the end of the century.

Of 3000 e-mail messages about Hale-Bopp that Hainaut received, about 600 concerned its alleged UFO companion. A specialist in astronomical image processing, particularly images of comets,

Hainaut said virtually all the purported UFOs found by amateur astronomers are "typical artifacts" in the images created by the types of detectors that amateurs use. He and a colleague proved that one image was a fraud, he said, and another, of unknown origin and date, "certainly looks fishy."

He offers the series of images with commentary at a Web site: http://www.ifa.hawaii.edu/~hainaut/Hale_Bopp/hb_ufo_list.html, and a summary of the Hale-Bopp companion hubbub at http://www.ifa.hawaii.edu/~hainaut/Hale_Bopp/hb_ufo.html.

Distressed by the public's low level of scientific literacy, especially on matters astronomical—"a frightening fraction of the population," Hainaut noted, "is still convinced that the earth is more or less the center of the solar system"—he tackled his mail with missionary zeal and technological skill. He used an e-mail reader program to extract notes about Hale-Bopp, scan for keywords, and sort them by categories, suggesting standard replies from a list of 5 or 6 templates for the most frequently asked questions. He checked the suitability of these, edited them, and sent them out.

Some recipients were unswayed by scientific findings. They fired back notes charging him with being "a CIA agent covering up the facts, a narrow-minded scientist, an alien myself, or refusing to face the fact that we don't know everything."

Hainaut does not deny that UFOs exist. "I have seen many unidentified flying objects," he said. "But no flying saucers." Supposedly alien spacecraft invariably appear only in the middle of nowhere, he said, "and never in front of one of the world's 250 000 astronomers."

According to psychiatrist Robert

Jay Lifton, MD, members of Heaven's Gate who died believing that they would be transported by a UFO to a better world embraced a prominent mythology of our time. "People pounce on ostensible evidence," Lifton said in an interview, "when it fits—or when they can make it fit—a fiercely held prior ideology."

Crash Dummies in the Desert

Meanwhile, the US Air Force held a press conference at the Pentagon in June 1997 to announce the "news" that space aliens allegedly seen in the desert near Roswell, NM, 50 years ago were anthropomorphic dummies used to test parachutes. At the same time, the Air Force issued a 231-page document, *The Roswell Report: Case Closed* (Washington, DC: US Govt Printing Office; 1997). Eyewitness accounts sparked films, books, and endless theories of government cover-ups, and may account for the now stereotypical view of aliens as smooth-skinned, grayish, featureless, humanoids. "This will be the final word on the incident," asserted Col John Haynes, deputy chief of the Air Force Declassification Review Team.

The astronomers doubt that. The Roswell chamber of commerce expected thousands of visitors, earthly if not alien, to converge on the town July 1-6, 1997, to mark the 50th anniversary of the nearby sightings. Scheduled events included tours of the crash site, exhibits and talks at the International UFO Museum and Research Center, a UFO Expo sponsored by the Roswell Jaycees, and an alien costume contest. Details and the original 1947 news reports are on the Internet at: www.roswellnm.org.

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