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Scaling Heaven's Gate

Individualism and Salvation in a New Religious Movement

Benjamin Ethan Zeller

Abstract: This article considers the new religious movement popularly known as Heaven's Gate within the context of American religious history, focusing on its soteriology (scheme of salvation) and the place of the individual within it. I argue that this contextualization reveals a movement that held unusual yet clearly identifiable religious beliefs reflecting popular religious subcultures and possessing clear historical antecedents. Specifically, within Heaven's Gate's soteriology one finds a synthesis of elements drawn from New Age thinking, Christian beliefs, and popular attitudes, and built upon assumptions of individualism and personal autonomy that pervade American religion. Rather than being an aberration of American religious history, Heaven's Gate was quintessentially American, albeit outside the religious mainstream.

In March 1997, police in the posh San Diego suburb of Rancho Santa Fe, California, burst into a sprawling mansion in a luxurious gated community to discover thirty-nine decomposing bodies, the earthly remains of the members of a group soon dubbed Heaven's Gate.¹ In ritual precision, the members of the group had orchestrated a mass suicide, the ultimate terminus of a new religious movement founded two decades earlier. A media circus ensued, each new story describing an even more bizarre "religious cult." The popular media linked Heaven's Gate² to the rise of the Internet and the appearance of the Hale-Bopp comet, but in fact, it had little to do with either. Beneath the apparent incoherence of the group's eccentric views lay an internally consistent set of religious beliefs. Examining the group's doctrines throughout its history indicates a progression of religious

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conceptualizations, which, despite changing over time, demonstrate a high level of consistency.

Broadly speaking, this article traces the intellectual and theological history of Heaven's Gate within the context of American religion. Specifically, I focus on the development of the movement's soteriology (scheme of salvation) and the place of the individual within it, especially as this relates to the group's millennial outlook. In Heaven's Gate's soteriology one finds a synthesis of elements drawn from New Age thinking, Christian beliefs, and popular attitudes, and built upon assumptions of individualism and personal autonomy that pervade American religion. In this regard, Heaven's Gate was quintessentially American, albeit outside the American religious mainstream. Finally, I consider how the movement's soteriology also led to its demise.

A year after the Heaven's Gate suicides, sociologist Robert Balch, who along with David Taylor studied and traveled with the movement in its early days, wrote that "perhaps the greatest irony in the New Age movement is that seekers who place such a high value on the individual pursuit of truth continually fall under the spell of spiritual teachers who provide them with prepackaged sets of beliefs in exchange for their individualism."³ He identifies the key to this puzzle in the preponderance of spiritual options found in the New Age subculture, options which can become overwhelming for the individual seeker. Balch's interpretation hinges on the demand side of the American religious marketplace, emphasizing the desire of individuals to find clear answers to complex problems.

This article takes a different approach, focusing on the supply side of the equation. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark have reminded scholars that the United States is a free religious marketplace and fertile ground for religious entrepreneurs.⁴ Extending the economic metaphor, the founders and leaders of Heaven's Gate were good spiritual salesmen with a marketable product, a constantly evolving but highly refined soteriology that appealed to a niche market of high-stakes spiritual seekers willing to focus exclusively on their religious self-fulfillment and ultimate salvation. Rather than consider how Heaven's Gate might have been received by potential converts (demand-side), here I ask what the religious product looked like (supply-side). Nevertheless, a guiding question in this article remains how and why the religious worldview of Heaven's Gate appealed to American spiritual seekers, people who are generally obsessed with individualism, but became adherents of a system that submerged their identities within that of a group. The answer: in its early days, the founders of Heaven's Gate emphasized theological and psychological individualism. As the group developed, this form of individualism faded, replaced with a soteriology that emphasized the unique status of Heaven's Gate's members as the few elect souls among a mass of vegetative humanity.

**SALVATION DEFINED: FROM SACRED
UMBRELLAS TO HEAVEN'S GATE, 1972–1975**

Of the movement's founders, Bonnie Lu Nettles (1928–1985) and Marshall Herff Applewhite (1932–1997), we know less about Nettles' personal life. A native of Houston, Nettles was a registered nurse, mother of four children, and partner in a failing marriage. She also engaged in astrology and was interested in the occult. A member of the Houston branch of the Theosophical Society in America and an amateur astrologer, Nettles inhabited a New Age subculture of disincarnate spirits, ascended masters, telepathic powers, and hidden and revealed gnosis.⁵ Applewhite came from a more conventionally Christian background. A Texan by birth, he was the son of a popular and successful Presbyterian preacher. After college he enrolled at Virginia's Union Theological Seminary, a Presbyterian divinity school, but left after two years to study music. It is possible that Applewhite departed seminary because he discovered himself to be homosexual, although in telling his own story he stressed his vocational shift.⁶ He earned a Masters degree in music and voice from the University of Colorado, though never strayed far from a religiously oriented vocation. A talented vocalist and charismatic instructor, Applewhite seemed not to identify strongly with any particular denomination in his adult life, directing both the choir at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Houston, and the fine arts program at the University of St. Thomas, a Catholic liberal arts school. Although he also dabbled in astrology, he seemed a nominal Christian, and as I demonstrate here Christian material permeated his thought.⁷

When Nettles and Applewhite met in 1972 at the Houston hospital where Nettles worked, both were in their mid-forties and the throes of significant life changes. (Applewhite's reasons for being in the hospital are unclear; he may have been either a visitor or patient at the time.)⁸ Nettles was separated and soon to be divorced; Applewhite, a divorcee with two children, had floundered through a series of failed hetero- and homosexual relationships. Rejecting the aspect of their lives that they found most unsettling—their marriages and sexual relationships—Nettles and Applewhite formed an intense spiritual, though by all accounts platonic, relationship. The rejection of their sexual natures emerged as an important aspect in Heaven's Gate's soteriology. A reductionist reading of Heaven's Gate might portray Applewhite's or Nettles' muddled sexuality as a prime cause for the eventual emergence of the extreme sexual asceticism that characterized the movement. While there is little doubt that the co-founders' rejection of their sexual natures strongly influenced the new religion, the worldview of Heaven's Gate demonstrates a complexity that complicates such reductionist analyses.⁹

As their spiritual partnership matured, Applewhite adopted Nettles' occult religious beliefs, a transformation likely made easier by his lack

of affiliation with any religious community and his previous exposure to astrology. Eventually he too claimed the existence of disembodied spirits, spoke of vibrations and auras, and sought the future in the stars.¹⁰ Applewhite had adopted Nettles' religious assumptions. Sociologist Christian Smith, playing on the "sacred canopy" thesis of Peter Berger, labels religious subcultures (such as evangelicalism, Orthodox Judaism, or the New Age) "'sacred umbrellas,' small, portable, accessible relational worlds—religious reference groups—'under' which their beliefs can make complete sense."¹¹ Extending the metaphor, Nettles furnished a New Age umbrella for the religiously dispossessed Applewhite, who had departed from his original Presbyterian subculture and seemed to be looking for shelter from the storm of life. Together, the two set about tinkering with the New Age worldview, though crafting a wider ideology that would soon differentiate itself from its New Age background.

A three-year period of wandering and religious formulation ensued (1972–1975), what Robert Balch called "an archetypal journey of self-discovery which they later described as a time of wandering in the wilderness."¹² During this period Applewhite and Nettles explored numerous religious options, which included ruminating on St. Francis of Assisi and how today's society might respond to the second coming of Jesus.¹³ Indeed, when they emerged from their time in the wilderness, they transformed into "the Two," christening themselves at various times Guinea and Pig, Bo and Peep, and eventually Ti (Nettles) and Do (Applewhite).¹⁴

The nucleus of Ti and Do's¹⁵ soteriology was belief in a process by which human beings bodily evolve into immortal extraterrestrials. The Two explained that those who followed their teaching could physically transform into extraterrestrials and journey to the "Next Level" or "Father's Kingdom"—metaphors for outer space, hence the movement's earlier names, Total Overcomers Anonymous and Human Individual Metamorphosis. In a 1975 written statement, they declared that "when the metamorphosis is complete . . . their 'new' body has overcome decay, disease and death. It has converted over chemically, biologically, and in vibration to the 'new' creature."¹⁶ Ti and Do compared this transformation to the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly. Like the butterfly emerging from its chrysalis, they carefully explained in the statement, this bodily transformation was only available for those "willing to overcome all of their caterpillar ways."¹⁷ They taught that the process of transformation entailed overcoming one's base human nature and rejecting all interpersonal relationships and attachments, especially sexual desires.¹⁸ The Two declared that a person could only evolve into a higher extraterrestrial form only "if he completely overcomes all the aspects and influences of the human level."¹⁹

When interviewer Hayden Hewes asked the Two in 1976 how much it would cost to come on their UFO trip, Ti and Do responded simply, "your humanness!"²⁰ In an interview with James Phelan two months later,

they explained that “you must leave all your past behind. This means that you walk out the door of your human life, taking with you only those things that will be necessary while you are still on this planet.”²¹ In practice, the process required a potential extraterrestrial to forswear intimate human contact (sex, close friendships, contact with family), addictive substances (drugs, alcohol, coffee), and possessions other than simple clothing, camping equipment, and an automobile.²² The reward, Ti and Do insisted, justified these sacrifices: “those who can believe this process and do it will be ‘lifted up’ individually and ‘saved’ from death—literally.”²³ Transformed into extraterrestrial creatures, a UFO would meet them in the air and whisk them off into the heavens.

The availability of this transformative process only became possible, they explained, because the Two were destined to be martyred and resurrected. They dubbed their martyrdom and resurrection “the demonstration,” because having risen from the dead, they would demonstrate to the world “that death can be literally overcome.”²⁴ Having healed themselves, the Two would enter an extraterrestrial craft or “what humans refer to as a UFO,” and depart for the heavens.²⁵ This sacrifice would inaugurate a new era or dispensation, what Ti and Do called “not a teaching one, but a gathering of the harvest of those who have overcome this world.”²⁶ They explained (in the third person), that while alive the Two’s sole mission involved “doing all they can to relate this truth as accurately as possible so that when their bodies recover from their ‘dead’ state (resurrection) and they leave ([in] UFO’s) those left behind will have clearly understood the formula.”²⁷

Ti and Do declared that the Christian Bible, specifically Revelation 11, prophesied this demonstration:

[An angel said:] And I will give power unto my two witnesses, and they shall prophesy . . . And when they shall have finished their testimony, the beast that ascendeth out of the bottomless pit shall make war against them, and shall overcome them, and kill them. And their dead bodies shall lie in the street of the great city . . . And after three days and an half the spirit of life from God entered into them, and they stood upon their feet . . . And they ascended up to heaven in a cloud. (Revelation 11:3–12, KJV)

Sometimes coy in identifying themselves as the two witnesses—during an interview with UFO researcher Brad Steiger, they refused to discuss the topic, calling it a “loaded question”²⁸—Applewhite and Nettles eventually embraced their newfound identities. “They traveled into Canada and all over the U.S. again,” a Heaven’s Gate self-history explains, “leaving little calling cards on pulpits saying, ‘The Two Witnesses are here,’ and then running.”²⁹ On other occasions, Ti and Do simply referred potential adherents to scripture. One such target recalled that they told him, “We have a message for you. You are to meditate. Read Revelation 11 and meditate.”³⁰

Applewhite and Nettles' reliance on the book of Revelation provides a crucial hint to understanding the Two's message of salvation. Intentionally or not, Ti and Do's soteriology relies upon several key ideas found in a variety of Christian millennialism called dispensationalism. Emerging in the nineteenth century, dispensationalism swept through American evangelicalism and remains popular today among many conservative Christians.³¹ Dispensationalists trawl Biblical books—particularly the books of Daniel and Revelation—for a millennial timetable, dividing the history of the world into distinct epochs or dispensations. The most common dispensational system is that of C. I. Scofield (1843–1921), whom historian George Marsden calls “the great systematizer of the movement.”³² Scofield identified seven dispensations, those of innocence (Eden), conscience (antediluvian), human government (postdiluvian), promise (Old Testament patriarchs), law (Mosaic), grace (the current age of the Church), and kingdom (the future dispensation of Christ's heaven-on-earth). For Scofield and others, a “rapture of the true church,” during which faithful Christians physically rise into midair, rendezvous with Christ, and enter Heaven, inaugurates the seventh dispensation.³³ Those left behind by the Rapture face the tribulations and traumas dispensationalists believe are described in the book of Revelation. Although Ti and Do never use the terms “dispensationalism” or “dispensation,” two central dispensationalist themes undergirded their soteriology: (1) the seven earthly epochs, and (2) the rapture.

Like other dispensationalists, the Two divided world history into seven eras, five of them in the past, one current, and one in the future. They explained these eras as “different ‘grades’ in the human ‘school’” during which humankind received different types of “special help from the level-above-human.”³⁴ The Two specified the five historical epochs as those of the biblical Adam, Enoch, Moses, Elijah, and Jesus, three of which (Adam/innocence/Edenic, Enoch/conscience/antediluvian, Moses/law/Mosaic) matched the popular Scofield system of dispensationalism. Paralleling mainstream dispensationalism's age of grace (the current, Church era), they maintained that “the sixth major help period for Earth's human garden is *now* . . . Once again we are in a brief season when the ‘light’ or ‘knowledge’ or ‘energy focus’ is on this planet.”³⁵ Finally, in a dispensationalist coup-de-grâce, they explain:

The seventh closeness, which is immediately upon us in the sense that those who are in the middle of their normal life span will easily live to see its completion, will include such events as what the Christian church refers to as the second coming, the “rapture,” and the completion of the final prophecies in John's Book of Revelation.³⁶

Ti and Do transformed the dispensationalist rapture into a technological one. Rather than meeting Christ midair, their followers would rendezvous aerially with UFOs, one of which would be crewed by the

extraterrestrial Christians remember as Jesus of Nazareth. "The one who was Jesus will come in at close range (as soon as those who have chosen to change over do it) and receive the elect in his company."³⁷

An obvious question is raised by this: how did premillennial dispensationalism end up in Heaven's Gate? Presbyterianism, Applewhite's birth-tradition, is not known for a particular affinity for premillennial thought. Yet dispensationalism must have held an allure for some Presbyterians; the fifty-three country presbytery that includes the city of Dallas went so far as to declare dispensationalism a heresy.³⁸ In fact, the Dallas Theological Seminary serves as dispensationalism's intellectual headwaters, making Texas a particular hotbed of premillennialism.³⁹ Another possible explanation is Nettles' background as a Baptist, most likely a Southern Baptist.⁴⁰ Baptists are notoriously difficult to categorize, and no surveys prior to 1984 exist on the millennial outlook of different Baptists.⁴¹ However, by her own admission, Nettles "always believed more strongly in the Eastern religions," making her an unlikely candidate for belief in Christian dispensationalism.⁴² A more probable explanation is that Nettles and Applewhite picked up premillennialism from the surrounding culture, even if neither had any formal religious background in groups espousing dispensational premillennialism. Applewhite, Nettles, and Heaven's Gate itself all were born in Texas. In *Blessed Assurance*, A. G. Mojtabai details the prevalence of dispensational thought in Texas. Though she focuses on the northern city of Amarillo, Mojtabai also discusses a statewide network of dispensationalist preachers and churches, as well as a premillennial popular culture of posters, prayer groups, movies, and books.⁴³ Premillennialism seeped out of Dallas throughout the state.

The two might also have absorbed dispensationalism through reading. Dispensationalist literature took off in the 1970s, led by Dallas Theological Seminary graduate Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which was published in 1970. The author, a self-declared prophecy expert, interpreted the book of Revelation and other biblical literature as predicting contemporary world events, such as the birth of Israel, the rise of communism, and an inevitable march towards the catastrophic clash between Christ and Antichrist. With over fifteen million copies in print by 1982, the book became the top-selling non-fiction book of the 1970s, fostering an increased emphasis on catastrophic millennialism within evangelicalism.⁴⁴ By their own admission Applewhite and Nettles read many religious books during their wilderness days: "We studied everything we could get our hands on that had to do with any sort of awareness—spiritual awareness, scientific awareness, religious awareness. Our thirst was absolutely unquenchable."⁴⁵ Though its presence is obvious, scholars will never know for certain how premillennial dispensationalism ended up in Heaven's Gate, owing to a dearth of archival materials and living members. Regardless, Ti and Do leaned on the concepts of dispensations and the rapture in order to explain how human beings could be saved.

SALVATION SOUGHT: CHOICE, QUEST, AND AGENCY, 1975–1985

When Ti and Do began to missionize in 1976, their core soteriology remained a process that transformed fallen humans into nearly perfected and immortal extraterrestrials.⁴⁶ In the Two's early rhetoric they taught that a UFO would descend into Earth's atmosphere, retrieve the faithful few, and whisk them away into the heavens. Ti and Do instructed their followers to complete the overcoming process while here in Earth, bodily metamorphosing into extraterrestrials before the UFO arrived. By the last days of Heaven's Gate's history, the group's materials describe this metamorphosis occurring after the earthly death of the body, when the liberated soul receives a new physical form aboard a spacecraft. Throughout the history of the movement, though, the Two's soteriology included two consistent elements: an escape from the Earth and a personal transformation into an immortal extraterrestrial being. "You [will] have eternal life," guarantees Do in a 1991 video recording, "you can wear a vehicle [i.e., a body], that for all intents and purposes, doesn't need to decay. It doesn't have any age, it doesn't come from a baby, it doesn't get old and need to be changed out."⁴⁷

Within the fiercely competitive American alternative religious marketplace, a major strength of the Two's early soteriology (1972–1975) was its theological and psychological individualism, defined here as the conviction that humans possess the temporal and spiritual authority to achieve salvation through personal self-transformation. Such a position appealed to the assumptions of New Age seekers, a population from which Heaven's Gate drew most of its converts during this period.⁴⁸ As religious historian Wouter Hanegraaff explains, "In a general sense 'personal growth' can be understood as the shape 'religious salvation' takes in the New Age movement."⁴⁹ The New Age, if one can generalize such a large and amorphous movement, posits that individuals effect their own salvation, whether they conceive it as self-improvement, metamorphosis, higher-level consciousness, or empowered chakras. A mediator, such as a spirit guide, living guru, or Theosophical Master assists the seeker, but (in most cases) personal growth requires individual effort. Appealing to this psychological individualist ethos, Ti and Do proclaimed, "If this speaks to you—respond—according to your capabilities or needs. For your sake—give this opportunity your best."⁵⁰ This exhortation, and others like it, is replete with appeals to a religious agent operating within an individualistic and pluralistic religious economy, that is, if their message speaks to *you*, respond according to *your* needs, for *your* sake.⁵¹

Balch and Taylor recognized that Ti and Do's teaching, while proclaiming an exclusive soteriology, remained inherently individualistic, "a direct outgrowth of the epistemological individualism."⁵² Further, the sociologists note that the Two "couched the absolutism of their message

in language designed to appeal to the open-minded tolerance of the seeker. They agreed that there were many equally valid paths to the top of the mountains, but they added that only a UFO could get the seeker *off* the mountain into the kingdom of heaven.⁵³ That is, the Two combined recognition of the validity of individual spiritual seeking with an insistence on the primacy of their own collective solution. In their own words, the Two allowed that “all good paths lead to the crest of the same mountain,” yet maintained that “from there, the only way up is off the top.”⁵⁴

It is hardly surprising that Ti and Do appealed to the individual needs of their audience, as they were quite aware that their potential converts possessed the temporal authority and willingness to exercise religious agency. “Those who are unhappy with what the world has to offer, or are seeking the *real* Truth, have turned to [the] New Age, Eastern religions, or simply have ‘dropped out’ to indulge in whatever excesses might bring them pleasure,” read a 1994 promotional poster.⁵⁵ This advertisement did not merely allude to the rise of new religious movements, it recognized and assumed that American individuals freely shift their religious preference and practice according to whichever group they feel best satisfies their needs. The Two were not alone in recognizing these facts. Describing the religious choices of the Baby Boomer generation, from which Heaven’s Gate drew the majority of its converts, Wade Clark Roof phrases it another way: “For religion to be alive and real, it had to arise out of their own experiences and encounters; anything less failed to grab their attention.”⁵⁶ First-generation new religious movements accentuate the individual choice motif, since by definition every member has chosen to change religious affiliation based on his or her personal beliefs and standards.⁵⁷

In a study of the recent decline of mainline Christian denominations in America, Phillip Hammond argues that a “greater numbers of people now . . . legitimately look upon their parish involvement as *their* choice, to be made according to *their* standards. That involvement is now calculated as rewarding or not by individually derived equations.”⁵⁸ Hammond’s concept of “individually derived equations” harkens to rational choice theory, which proffers a similar argument but claims that such religious individualism is inherent to human life and not simply a recent historical development. Paralleling Hammond’s assertion, Ti and Do recognized that potential followers would judge Heaven’s Gate according to *their* standards, that ultimately it was *their* choice, and the Two appealed to this ethos. They closed a 1975 letter to prospective candidates by declaring: “Most importantly, you have will and choice; you do not have to do anything. The way to overcome will be shown to you. You will take it from there, and you will have help.” Instances of the word “you” comprise fifteen percent of the final three sentences of this letter, revealing the individualist assumptions underlying its proselytizing.⁵⁹

The Two's soteriology evolved over the twenty years of Heaven's Gate's history. In the early days of the movement, up to early 1976, Ti and Do's soteriological rhetoric assumed both psychological and theological individualism. "If you recognize this as Truth," Ti and Do wrote in their letter to prospective candidates, "you have only to ask with all your might (out loud or in your head) for your Father(s) in the Next Kingdom to give you whatever tests are necessary for your overcoming." Later in the letter they clarify, "When you have left all behind, you can meet others in the process and they will clarify any questions you may have."⁶⁰ Although fellow members of the proto-movement may assist, only an individual can achieve salvation. Balch and Taylor reported that Ti and Do's followers understood this explicitly. One reported, "This isn't a group metamorphosis and the organization isn't going to heaven."⁶¹ Furthermore, even the Two were not necessary. In a 1974 interview, Ti and Do explained that if anyone "truly seeks to enter the kingdom of Heaven, the option is his and he will do it if he chooses to. Such people do not do it through us. They do it through the information we are sharing."⁶² This represents the zenith of individualistic soteriology in Heaven's Gate.

Within a year of their first public meetings in the fall of 1975, Ti and Do had attracted several hundred followers. As the movement grew in size, individualistic antinomianism endangered its stability. Balch notes from his fieldwork that "when disputes arose, each individual could justify his or her opinion by claiming to have received guidance directly from a member of the next kingdom."⁶³ If the Two had not shifted their soteriology, it is unlikely Heaven's Gate would have survived. Between 1976 and 1977, the Two challenged the antinomian spirit. Unfortunately, no primary sources demonstrate this transition, but Robert Balch's articles clearly indicate the shift. He writes that "the Two solved the problem by eliminating any possibility of individual revelation. They explained that all information from the next level was channeled through a 'chain of mind' linking the next kingdom to individual members through [Ti and Do]."⁶⁴

The Two, Balch summarized, "became necessary intermediaries between members and the next level."⁶⁵ Now, humans could pursue the overcoming process only through the mediation and guidance of the Two, the heavenly mandated "older members" from the Next Level. The Two served as the conduit of divine knowledge required to effect salvation—not merely examples in a demonstration—and it was only through them that a human being could pass through heaven's gate. Although Ti and Do's necessity was a new doctrine for Heaven's Gate, the trope of achieving salvation through the assistance and intercession of a specially endowed figure or figures was not. Ti and Do had always taught that a potential new member of the Next Level must seek the support of a current member of the Kingdom.

The key difference was that earlier the Two did not recommend any particular figure, or referred to the nebulous and undefined "Father(s)." ⁶⁶ The post-1976 doctrine reversed this. Balch reports that following this new revelation, commitment levels increased and defection rates dropped. ⁶⁷

SALVATION TRANSFORMED: SOTERIOLOGICAL CHANGES, 1985–1997

Although Heaven's Gate continued to evolve both theologically and organizationally until its demise in 1997, one momentous development signaled a significant shift in the group's fundamental religious assumptions. In 1985 Bonnie Lu Nettles, aka Ti, died of liver cancer. Throughout the remaining years of the group's existence, Applewhite (Do) disseminated three important updates to the Heaven's Gate doctrine: (1) catastrophic millennialism; (2) bodily death before salvation; and (3) the place of Ti in the ontological chain of being.

The Two's millennial outlook constantly evolved. Ti and Do initially predicated their millennialism on the seventh dispensation inaugurated by "the demonstration," i.e., their martyrdom and subsequent resurrection three- and-a-half days later. ⁶⁸ Yet, in the years and decades that followed, no one murdered the Two. Shifting from a literalist to symbolic reading of Revelation 11 solved this problem—"the 'killing in the street' of the two witnesses had occurred at the hands of the media," explained Do. ⁶⁹ Likewise, Do moved from a benign variant of dispensationalism, emphasizing personal transformation, to a catastrophic millennialism stressing worldly destruction. As Catherine Wessinger defines it, catastrophic millennialism is "a pessimistic view of humanity, society, and history" emphasizing belief in an imminent, cataclysmic worldly destruction. "The millennial kingdom will be created only after the violent destruction of the old world," Wessinger explains, in contrast with progressive millennialism, which posits "an optimistic view of human nature . . . [that] humans engaging in social work in harmony with the divine will can effect changes that non-catastrophically and progressively create the millennial kingdom." ⁷⁰ Christian catastrophic millennialism normally emphasizes the destructive nature of the clash between Christ and Satan, prophesying declension and suffering before the arrival of Christ.

Unlike most dispensationalists, Ti and Do initially did not emphasize catastrophic millennialism. ⁷¹ The Two's early teachings lacked eschatological urgency. For example, when asked why they did not allow potential adherents to bring their children with them, Ti and Do explained, "As for any small child who has not come into sufficient maturity to do the process at this time, it will be his time at another springtime. Nothing is lost." ⁷² At no point in the early (pre-1980) history of Heaven's Gate do its founders mention an imminent earthly apocalypse. But a series of

satellite television broadcasts in 1991 and 1992 revealed a strikingly different eschatological position: soon Next Level extraterrestrials would harvest planet Earth of its useful souls, recycling the rest of human civilization as an unneeded waste product. Do declared, “It’s harvest time. Harvest time means that it’s time for the garden to be spaded up. It’s time for a recycling of souls. It’s time for some to ‘graduate.’ It’s time for some to be ‘put on ice.’ It’s time!”⁷³ And again, with an individualist thrust, “it *is* the end of the Age. What matters is where are *you* at the time of the spading, at the time of the harvest? What happens to you? Have you become something that’s so worthless that our Father’s House has no need of you, and He just recycles you?”⁷⁴

A year later, Heaven’s Gate was even more specific. Taking out a third-of-a-page advertisement in *USA Today*, the advert “‘UFO’ Cult Resurfaces With Final Offer” trumpeted “the Earth’s present ‘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.”⁷⁵ Finally, less than a year before the suicides, Heaven’s Gate produced two videos dedicated to warning the world of its impending fate, “Last Chance to Evacuate Earth Before It’s Recycled,” and “Planet About to be Recycled—Your Only Chance to Survive.”⁷⁶ In order to understand the reason for this change in eschatological outlook, one must consider two other shifts in Heaven’s Gate’s theology: the place of bodily death in salvation, and the role of Ti.

Since the earliest days of Heaven’s Gate, Ti and Do taught that a UFO would descend to Earth and, in a technological reenactment of the dispensationalist belief in the rapture of the faithful, bodily save the select few true believers. Yet no extraterrestrials appeared to whisk away Nettles before her body succumbed to cancer, nor did the saucers land to claim her physical body. This was likely a moment of massive cognitive dissonance in the movement, though no available documents survive to support this conjecture. Heaven’s Gate survived because Do heightened the distinction between the body and the soul in his theology. Whereas, previously, the chosen few would board the UFO in bodily form, post-1985 he revealed that the members of Heaven’s Gate may need to shed their bodies in order to make the transition to their new extraterrestrial forms. Language referring to the body as a “vehicle” proliferated in the ’88 *Update*, and by 1992 the body had become merely a “container.”⁷⁷

The significance of this shift cannot be overemphasized. Of the transit to the Next Level, in 1974 Ti and Do stated simply: “You do not have to die.”⁷⁸ Two years later, they declared even more explicitly that the most important truth of their message was: “*You must take a changed-over physical body with you into the next level.*” That truth was of such value that in the seventy-four-page transcript of the interview in which the statement

appears, it is the only italicized sentence.⁷⁹ Yet, in 1988, Do explained that “a member of the Next Level wears a body like a suit of clothes.”⁸⁰ Ti’s passing, therefore, represented her soul’s departure for the heavens, not death:

Some 3 1/2 years ago from the time of this writing, Ti left her human vehicle. To all human appearances it was due to a form of liver cancer. We could say that because of the stress, due to the gap between her Next Level mind and the vehicle’s genetic capacity, that the cancer symptom caused the vehicle to break down and stop functioning . . . We’re not exactly sure how many days it might have taken her to return to the Next Level vehicle she left behind prior to this task.⁸¹

Reconceptualizing the admissions requirements to the Next Level, Do ensured Heaven’s Gate’s survival after Nettles’ unexpected bodily death. However, in doing so, Do fostered a mind/body dualism that ultimately permitted suicide. Emblematic of the shift in the group’s thought, the final written document produced by Heaven’s Gate as explicitly declares its theology as do Ti and Do’s early statements, though it details an opposite position. “You must leave *everything* of your humanness behind. This includes the ultimate sacrifice and demonstration of faith—that is, the shedding of your human body. In so doing . . . you will be picked up after shedding your vehicle, and taken to another world—by members of the Kingdom of Heaven.”⁸²

Even so, it took a third change in Heaven’s Gate’s soteriology for suicide to become a viable, rather than merely possible, option: a transformation in how Ti and Do functioned within the movement’s soteriology. A little less than a decade before Nettles’ death, Ti and Do had declared themselves necessary conduits through which the members of their movement could receive revelation and instruction. Following his co-founder’s death, Do upgraded her status from co-leader to superior. The group’s ’88 *Update* proclaims that since the departure of Ti, “Do has been experiencing the role of having to communicate mentally with her, his Older Member . . . Does the quote ‘The Father is in Me and I am in My Father’ mean maybe a little more than we previously thought it might?” Ti became the Father, and Do the Son; Nettles, God; Applewhite, Christ. The update continues, “‘What has the class been doing for 12 years?’ you might ask. They have been tuning their minds with their Older Member’s mind, who has been tuning his mind with his Older Member’s mind, and so forth up the ladder.”⁸³ The placement of apostrophes in this quote is important. The members of Heaven’s Gate sought guidance and direction from one person, Do, who in turn understood himself to receive similar instruction from the now-disembodied Ti, who herself was part of a larger hierarchy, which the movement variously called the evolutionary chain, the chain of command, the chain of mind, or simply “the

vine.”⁸⁴ This ideological transformation is essential in understanding why the group entertained the plausibility of suicide. If the members of Heaven’s Gate were somehow deprived of Do, which became a distinct possibility as Applewhite aged, they too would lose access to their elder mind.

After Ti’s death, Do turned towards a less self-reliant understanding of salvation, slowly rejecting psychological and theological individualism. Early sources described the salvific process as individual and metamorphic: humans transformed into Next Level beings, then departed for the heavens in a UFO.⁸⁵ The latest available source pre-dating Ti’s death, a 1985 document titled “Preparing for Service,” specifies the role of teacher as a “guide.” Although this document stressed the need to respect the teacher, it also declared “you are the Central Sun in your own Solar System” and “nothing external has power over you.”⁸⁶ Documents post-dating Ti’s death introduce the Biblical metaphors of “vine” and “grafting.”⁸⁷ Do now taught that the Next Level operated in a strictly hierarchical manner, that only through one’s immediate older member might one advance and evolve. In 1988, Do explained that commands are “handed down through the vine” and in fact that “Next Level bodies . . . are grown as plants from a vine.”⁸⁸ Vacillating between botanical metaphor and biological process, Do declared that “there seems to be an actual grafting process used and genetic binding from Older Members. ‘I am the vine, ye are the branches’ [John 15:5]—could that mean something more than previously thought?”⁸⁹ One of Do’s final written statements, the introduction to the Heaven’s Gate anthology, *How and When Heaven’s Gate May Be Entered*, explicitly declared the necessity of the grafting process.

Those who endure the “transition classroom” until it ends (adequately bonding or “grafting” to that Representative) will go with that Representative [Do]—literally LEAVE the human kingdom and Earth as He is about to do. Staying behind, for any significant period, could jeopardize that “graft.”⁹⁰

By the final days of Heaven’s Gate, the mediation of Do replaced individualist self-reliance as the core of the movement’s soteriology.

SALVATION LIMITED: ELECTION, DEPOSITS, AND PREDESTINATION

Another striking change in Heaven’s Gate soteriology—the doctrines of election and deposits—limited its self-reliant nature. Elucidating these concepts during the final years of the movement’s existence, Do first mentioned election—the idea that God (or the Next Level, in the

case of Heaven's Gate) selects which individuals are to be saved—in *Beyond Human*, a twelve-part video series released in 1991–1992. In the waning minutes of the seventh segment, Do declared:

We feel that what has been shared with us can shorten the days of the elect. If you have come here from our Father's Kingdom to finish your overcoming, then you know what we're saying is true, and you'll be waiting and craving to go full throttle in finishing that off, knowing that there is a short time in which to do it.⁹¹

Here, Do alluded to a New Testament verse that he quoted elsewhere, Mark 13:20: "And except that the Lord shorten those days [i.e. the tribulations associated with the endtime], none shall be saved: but for the elect's sake, whom He has chosen, He hath shortened the days."⁹² Next, he glossed the passage, invoking specifically Christian theological terminology in order to explain the mystery of individual election. "The 'elect' would mean that you have been picked to finish your overcoming," he said. "You could say, 'Oh boy, I placed such a 'high falootin' interpretation of what the elect is, how could I be one of the elect'? Well, if the Next Level picks you, don't question it. Let them be the ones responsible for that."⁹³

Here, Do echoes a particular form of Protestant soteriology, that which is found in Reformed theology, known more popularly as Calvinism. Indeed, Reformed thought is the historical antecedent of Applewhite's own Presbyterian Church US (PCUS), although the moderate Presbyterianism of the PCUS had moved away from the strict Calvinism of John Knox and John Witherspoon.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, the former seminarian was certainly familiar with the Reformed Westminster Confession, which is still printed in *The Presbyterian Books of Confessions*, and which famously declares that some are "predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death."⁹⁵ Do's apologetic explanation of election is in fact analogous to Calvin's defense of God's glory and justice, or Westminster's "high mystery of predestination," the doctrine that God alone determines who is or is not saved, and is the logical extension of the Reform notions of election and the irresistible nature of grace.⁹⁶ Although it is impossible to determine if Do intentionally incorporated Reformed theology into Heaven's Gate or was perhaps subconsciously inspired by the theological precursors to his birth-tradition, the presence of concepts analogous to Reformed notions of predestination and election in Heaven's Gate does demonstrate that Applewhite's earlier religious life and likely exposure to historical Reformed thought had not entirely left him.⁹⁷

Only the elect, Do proclaimed, those predestined for salvation, could hope for an eventual extraterrestrial salvation. "The Kingdom of God sends crews to 'tag' or make 'deposits' in human bodies and their

minds/spirits . . . These deposits offer their recipients ‘recognition’ of the Representatives [i.e., Ti and Do] . . . Without these ‘deposits’ no choice of becoming a student is within the will of a human.”⁹⁸ The former seminarian recognized that this understanding of election was Christian in origin, pointing to (an unspecified part of) the Christian Bible as a proof-text. “A funny thing here is recorded in the Scripture and it confuses a lot of people, because you can’t really get into the Kingdom of Heaven, no matter what you do, just on your own. It takes a *gift* from the Kingdom of Heaven to *even get you with their Representative.*” Do stressed the word “gift,” akin to the Christian concept of grace, and the understanding that the gift is absolutely necessary. “That little gift,” he continued, “is almost like a little ‘chip’ that’s planted in their brain or in their body somehow.”⁹⁹

In 1992, Do described this implanted grace—i.e., the deposit—as a technical (though not temporal) device used by the Next Level to monitor a person’s spiritual progress or reveal their physical location, “like a beeper or tag, or something that would enable the rancher or farmer to keep track of that animal and watch its development.”¹⁰⁰ By the final days of the movement, Do equated the deposit with the soul. A deposit contains a “soul’s beginnings,” he explained.¹⁰¹ In 1995, Heaven’s Gate bluntly declared that “humans in any given time seem to fall in one of three categories: (i) Humans without deposit—those who are simply ‘plants’ . . . (ii) those with deposits/souls who are receiving nourishment from the present Rep(s) toward metamorphic completion, and (iii) those with deposits/souls who are not in a classroom nor in a direct relationship with the Representative(s) from the Level Beyond Human.”¹⁰² Such a predestinarian soteriology flatly denied the possibility of salvation to any person not graced with a deposit, or soul.

Predestination, election, and grace may have hit a nerve with potential converts or members of Heaven’s Gate, former Christians who thought they had left behind them any vestiges of Protestantism, let alone Calvinism. Free will and the efficacy of personal religious agency are hallmarks of the New Age and numerous self-improvement movements, a population from which Ti and Do drew the majority of their adherents.¹⁰³ Even those with Christian backgrounds may have balked. Most mainline and evangelical Christian denominations shy away from Reformed soteriology with its emphasis on predestination and election, although they generally retain the notion of grace. Despite refusing to mute the quasi-Calvinist elements of his message, Do attempted to ease the transition for those unaccustomed to this type of soteriology. In his introduction to the eleventh session of *Beyond Human*, Do encouraged his audience, “I can’t even imagine that you would begin to recognize it [i.e., his message] if that possibility is not there for you.”¹⁰⁴ Do reassured his listeners that the possibility he speaks of, of becoming a “son of His Kingdom,” is very real for anyone who has managed to listen through ten

one-hour videotaped lectures. Don't worry about election, Do seemed to be saying, you probably are elected if you've gotten this far.

Yet regardless of Do's reinterpretation, predestination challenged the ethos and ideology of individualist self-efficacy that characterized Heaven's Gate's early days. Two possibilities explain the slow ideological shift from a universalist New Age soteriology to a predestinarian one reminiscent of Reformed thought. The first is that Nettles, who introduced much of the New Age worldview to Applewhite, had died in 1985. Do first mentions implanted chips in 1988 and codified the new soteriology by 1993. Freed from the New Age influence of Bonnie Nettles, did Applewhite return to his Presbyterian roots in order to restructure the movement? This is not a satisfying answer for two reasons: (1) Do did not strip any other New Age or occult concepts from Heaven's Gate's worldview. Certainly its ideology changed over the years, but no overarching shift is evident.¹⁰⁵ And, (2) there is no indication that Applewhite was a Calvinist before meeting Nettles, in the sense that he accepted predestination and election. When Applewhite attended Union Theological Seminary, which was then affiliated with the Presbyterian Church of United States (PCUS), many of his church's leaders had abandoned these doctrines. A denominational amendment to the Westminster Confession of Faith passed in 1941 implicitly rejected them, and declarations in 1958 and 1961 made this rejection explicit.¹⁰⁶

It is more plausible that the doctrines of grace and election in Do's thought served an explanatory role, justifying for himself and for his members why so many people rejected or deserted the movement. Like many new religious movements, Heaven's Gate served as a launch pad or intermediate step for individual spiritual seekers investigating their religious options. Although hundreds of people had joined the movement at various times, only dozens remained longer than a few months, most using their involvement with Heaven's Gate as a chance to explore their spirituality, but eventually deciding to move on to something different. Balch witnessed and noted the massive defection rates within the movement, from two hundred active members in 1975, to eighty in 1980. By the time of the 1997 suicides, half of those members had left as well.¹⁰⁷

In this context, election separated the in-group from the out-group, and explained the troublesome revolving door of group membership. Unlike the Puritans, Dutch Reformed, or other Calvinist communities, members of Heaven's Gate did not profess any doubts about their election. Do specifically reminded them that if they remained part of the group, they were elect. No members or former members of Heaven's Gate or its predecessor movements recorded any Edwardsian struggles over the state of their souls. There is no evidence that Ti or Do ever turned away any prospective adherents under the pretext that the Older Members declared them not to be among the elect. Never did the spiritual leaders of the movement eject a follower because he or she lacked

grace, although Ti and Do expelled at least nineteen people from the group over the years.¹⁰⁸

Rather, the neo-Reformed elements of the group's soteriology served to minimize what Leon Festinger and his colleagues termed cognitive dissonance. In his flawed but valuable study of the "Seekers," a small UFO group, Festinger utilizes the concept of dissonance to explain how the Seekers responded to a failed doomsday prophecy. The predicted events in the two groups are quite similar—for the Seekers, no UFO landing, for Heaven's Gate, widespread rejection by the popular audience and no UFO landing. The result is the same: cognitive dissonance. "The fact that the predicted events did not occur is dissonant with continuing to believe both the prediction and the remainder of the ideology of which the prediction was the central item," writes Festinger.¹⁰⁹ In the case of the Seekers, Festinger and his colleagues argue, the disappointed believers sought to reduce the dissonance by proselytizing. Ti and Do developed for their followers a soteriology that explained why so few people joined their movement, satisfying Festinger's requirement that the group minimize dissonance in order to survive: "the dissonance would be largely eliminated if they discarded the belief that had been disconfirmed, [or] ceased the behavior which had been initiated in preparation for the fulfillment of the prediction."¹¹⁰ Heaven's Gate did both, discarding the notion that salvation (i.e., the overcoming process) was open to all, and largely neglected proselytizing for extended periods of time. The cognitive dissonance model best explains this shift in Heaven's Gate's soteriology.

Further, Do's soteriology was more complex than merely a reflection of Calvinist predestination. Although a person without a deposit cannot overcome the human condition, even those whom the Next Level has graced with one are not guaranteed salvation. Unlike the Reformed doctrine of irresistible grace, the notion of grace that Do upheld can only exclude; it does not ensure salvation.¹¹¹ In the context of Heaven's Gate, grace frees individuals to embrace the path of knowledge that permits salvation, but it cannot guarantee that they will do so. Here the Calvinist predestination within the Two's soteriology succumbs to New Age individualism, or perhaps the Presbyterian background of Applewhite yields to the New Age mentality of the deceased Nettles. Ultimately, salvation is a personal achievement, effected by a free-willed agent, albeit mediated by a teacher and authorized by grace.

SALVATION ACHIEVED: SUICIDE AND THE END OF HEAVEN'S GATE

The radical dualism that convinced adherents of Heaven's Gate that their bodies were only containers made suicide viable, but it was not until the Spring of 1993 that allusions to a possible mass suicide appear

in the group's public rhetoric. In an advertisement printed in several major newspapers, the group declared that "a soul cannot end its own existence. Though it may incarnate many times and the body or vehicle it is wearing may be terminated, only the true Kingdom of God—the Evolutionary Level Above Human—can terminate the soul. This termination of the soul is the only proper application of the term DEATH."¹¹² Having redefined death, the problematic ethical implications of suicide faded.

Several episodes conspired to heighten the possibility of suicide. The 1993 government assault on the Branch Davidian residence in Waco, Texas, reinforced the group's distrust of and suspicions about the government and American treatment of alternative religious groups.¹¹³ Combined with the group's longstanding disgust at what they viewed as rampant immorality and cultural decline, these qualms induced fears that the apocalypse might be around the corner—a perspective shared by Lindsey in his *The Late Great Planet Earth* and more recent publications, and mirrored by numerous Christians throughout history.¹¹⁴ As well, Do became increasingly concerned about his health, indicating to the members of the group that their only remaining link to the Next Level appeared ready to leave them.

Only a catalyst was lacking—the right sign from Ti and the higher echelons of the great chain of mind that suicide was indeed the appropriate action to take. Like many religionists before them, the members of Heaven's Gate found their confirmation in the sky, in the form of the Hale-Bopp comet, which would reach its perigee to Earth on 22 March 1997, the day selected to begin the suicides.¹¹⁵ A few weeks earlier, national radio personality Art Bell discussed the possibility that an unidentified flying object was trailing the approaching Hale-Bopp comet. Convinced that this UFO was a Next Level vessel piloted by Ti, Do and the members of Heaven's Gate decided that the time had come for them to shed their human vehicles and take to the stars. "Ti and Do had always believed in synchronicity," wrote Robert Balch and David Taylor, "and now everything seemed to be falling into place: Do's failing health, the conclusion of the harvest, the arrival of the comet, and the approach of Easter [on March 30]."¹¹⁶ To the members of Heaven's Gate, it apparently made perfect sense, as is evident in their videotaped farewell messages.¹¹⁷

When the members of Heaven's Gate gathered to end their bodily existences, they were enacting the final episode in a salvific drama. This drama had unfolded over multiple stages and drew inspiration from multiple muses: Christian theology, the individualistic American spiritual marketplace, and New Age self-improvement, among others. It was twenty years in the making, an extensively developed production that ended in a manner that none of its initial spectators could have imagined. The first media response was predictable: accusations of brainwashing

and a dehumanization of the members of the group, ironic given that the adherents of Heaven's Gate also sought their own dehumanization. Pundits and reporters did their best to exoticize Heaven's Gate, transforming them into an object of ridicule.¹¹⁸ What was lost, or intentionally ignored, was the quintessentially American nature of this movement. Like many other Americans, the group declared the eternal soul the true seat of personal identity, the difference being that Heaven's Gate took its Cartesian dualism to its most radical but eerily logical conclusion. They wrestled with decoding the book of Revelation and applying its vague prophecies to contemporary events, a similarity that the millions of readers of *The Late Great Planet Earth*, and its twenty-first century successor, Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins' *Left Behind* series, might find deeply unsettling. Perhaps most telling, like many other Americans, members of Heaven's Gate were radical individualists who willingly invested their personal salvation in the work of a savior figure. Rather than envision the members of Heaven's Gate as deluded cultists under the spell of a brainwashing leader, it must be recognized that the individuals who committed suicide in Rancho Santa Fe were spiritual seekers obsessed with their own salvation. The earthly remains of these thirty-nine souls who quested for heavenly salvation is perhaps the darkest commentary on the modern American fixation on individualism and personal religious exploration, but it is also a testament to the human quest for control, for meaning, and for salvation.

ENDNOTES

¹ Thirty-nine members of Heaven's Gate died in the Rancho Santa Fe mansion. Two members of the group were not present and subsequently ritually ended their lives: Wayne Cooke (b. 1943) died 6 May 1997. Chuck Humphrey (b. 1943) died 17 February 1998. This paper was presented at the 2003 annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion. I wish to thank those who responded at that session and the anonymous reviewers of *Nova Religio* for their helpful comments in revising the paper for publication. Thanks are specifically owed to Catherine Wessinger, Rebecca Moore, Douglas E. Cowan, Robert Balch, and Yaakov Ariel for their suggestions.

² The group that eventually assumed the name Heaven's Gate went by a number of different names. Whether it called itself Human Individual Metamorphosis, Total Overcomers Anonymous, Anonymous Sexaholics Celibate Church, the UFO Cult, or Heaven's Gate, however, the carry-over in membership and persistence of ideological threads solidified the movement throughout its twenty-year history. Since I am more interested in a thematic exploration than an organizational history, I will somewhat anachronistically refer to the group as Heaven's Gate throughout this article. For details on carry-over in group membership, see Robert W. Balch, "The Evolution of a New Age Cult: From Total

Overcomers Anonymous to Death at Heaven's Gate," in *Sects, Cults, and Spiritual Communities: A Sociological Analysis*, ed. William W. Zellner and Marc Petrowsky (Westport, Ct.: Praeger Publishers, 1998), 1–24, and Robert W. Balch and David Taylor, "Making Sense of the Heaven's Gate Suicides," in *Cults, Religions, and Violence*, ed. David G. Bromley and J. Gordon Melton (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 209–228.

³ Balch, "The Evolution of a New Age Cult," 6.

⁴ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

⁵ Biographical information on Nettles is scant. These details come from the secondary literature, especially that of Robert Balch. See Robert W. Balch, "Bo and Peep: A Case Study of the Origins of Messianic Leadership," in *Millennialism and Charisma*, ed. Roy Wallis (Belfast: The Queen's University, 1982), 28. For more on Nettles' involvement in the Theosophical Society in America, see Catherine Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven's Gate* (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2000), 232, n. 55.

⁶ Robert W. Balch, personal communication with author, 2 February 2004.

⁷ This biographical sketch is based on secondary materials, especially Robert W. Balch, "Bo and Peep," 29, and the sidebar "Bo and Peep" in Robert W. Balch and David Taylor, "Salvation in a UFO," *Psychology Today* 10, no. 5 (1976): 66. Readers interested in a more lengthy description and analysis of Nettles' and Applewhite's history should also see James S. Phelan, "Looking For: The Next World," *New York Times Magazine* (29 February 1976); 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: New Religions from Other Worlds*, ed. James R. Lewis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 141–42.

⁸ Balch, for example, calls the encounter "chance" ("Waiting for the Ships," 143), noting that Applewhite was visiting a friend recovering from an operation. ("Bo and Peep," 33). After the mass suicides, several media outlets claimed that Applewhite was a mental patient at the time. See Evan Thomas, "Web of Death," *Newsweek* (7 April 1997): 31.

⁹ Perhaps the most obvious example of such a reductionist reading of Heaven's Gate is David Daniel's "The Beginning of the Journey," *Newsweek* (13 April 1997): 36–37.

¹⁰ Hayden Hewes and Brad Steiger recorded one of Applewhite's early discussions of vibrations in a 1976 interview; see Brad Steiger, "Interview with Marshall Herff Applewhite and Bonnie Lu Nettles," in *UFO Missionaries Extraordinary*, ed. Hayden Hewes and Brad Steiger (New York: Pocket Books, 1976), 82. On spirits and spirit guides, see Steiger, "Interview," 133. For examples after Nettles' death, see Heaven's Gate, *Beyond Human—The Last Call*, session 8 (vibrations) and session 3 (spirits). N.b., transcripts of the twelve-part *Beyond Human* series are contained in Heaven's Gate, *How and When "Heaven's Gate" May Be Entered: An Anthology of Our Materials* (Mill Springs, N.C.: Wild Flower Press, 1997), hereafter *Heaven's Gate: An Anthology*. When citing this collection, I follow its overall internal pagination scheme, which lists section and page number within the section. Appendices A and B are cited accordingly, while the front matter lacks a section number. When citing the *Beyond Human* transcripts, I also provide the session number.

¹¹ Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 106.

¹² Balch, "Bo and Peep," 39.

¹³ Balch, "Bo and Peep," 39.

¹⁴ Applewhite and Nettles used a plethora of names during the first years of their evangelism. During the early days of the movement when they were experimenting with their religious identities, Nettles and Applewhite adopted the monikers Guinea and Pig. "They explained that they were being used as guinea pigs in an experiment of cosmic proportions," writes Balch ("Bo and Peep," 53) Later, when the two became religious leaders and began gathering a flock, they claimed the names Bo (Nettles) and Peep (Applewhite). The '88 *Update*, authored by Do, explains that the two took the names because "it looks like we're gathering our lost sheep." (Marshall Herff Applewhite, "'88 *Update*," in *Heaven's Gate: An Anthology*, sec. 3 p. 7) Finally, the Two renamed themselves Ti and Do, the names of two musical notes. They never explained the reason for this final choice.

¹⁵ When I refer to the Applewhite and Nettles in their roles as the religious leaders of Heaven's Gate, I refer to them using the designations that they ultimately preferred. Although some readers may be struck by the infantilizing tone of these monosyllabic monikers, I remind them that these are the names that the two chose for themselves. I employ their surnames in this article in describing their individual identities outside of Heaven's Gate.

¹⁶ Marshall Herff Applewhite and Bonnie Lu Nettles, "First Statement," in *Heaven's Gate: An Anthology*, sec. 2, p. 3.

¹⁷ Applewhite and Nettles, "First Statement," sec. 2, p. 4. See also Heaven's Gate, "95 Statements By an E.T. Presently Incarnate," in *Heaven's Gate: An Anthology*, sec. 1, p. 8; and *Beyond Human*, sessions 3, 12; Steiger, "Interview."

¹⁸ Steiger, "Interview," 115–19, 123–25.

¹⁹ Applewhite and Nettles, "First Statement," sec. 2, p. 3.

²⁰ Steiger, "Interview," 152.

²¹ Phelan, "Looking For: The Next World," 58.

²² Phelan, "Looking For: The Next World," 58.

²³ Applewhite and Nettles, "First Statement," sec. 2, p. 4.

²⁴ Applewhite and Nettles, "First Statement," sec. 2, p. 3.

²⁵ Applewhite and Nettles, "First Statement," sec. 2, p. 4. For more on Ti and Do's reading of biblical "clouds" as UFOs, see Heaven's Gate, *Planet About to be Recycled—Your Only Chance to Survive*, VHS Videotape (5 October 1996); the 1994 promotional posters "Last Chance to Advance Beyond Human (Extended Statement)," (in *Heaven's Gate: An Anthology*, sec. 6, p. 4); "UFOs, Space Aliens, and Their Final Fight for Earth's Spoils" (in *Heaven's Gate: An Anthology*, sec. 6, p. 8); "He's Back, We're Back, Where do You Stand?" (in *Heaven's Gate: An Anthology*, sec. 6, p. 9); and "UFO 'Cult' Resurfaces With Final Offer" (in *Heaven's Gate: An Anthology*, sec. 5, p. 3).

²⁶ Marshall Herff Applewhite and Bonnie Lu Nettles, "A Statement Prepared by The Two," in *UFO Missionaries Extraordinary*, ed. Hayden Hewes and Brad Steiger (New York: Pocket Books, 1976), 168.

²⁷ Applewhite and Nettles, "First Statement," sec. 2, p. 4.

²⁸ Steiger, "Interview," 152.

²⁹ Applewhite, '88 *Update*, sec. 3, pp. 4–5.

³⁰ This episode is retold in Hewes and Steiger, *UFO Missionaries Extraordinary*, 18.

³¹ For the historical development of dispensationalism, including an institutional and cultural history of its spread through nineteenth-century evangelicalism, see George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980). For more on twentieth-century evangelicalism, see A. G. Mojtabai, *Blessed Assurance: At Home with the Bomb in Amarillo, Texas* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986).

³² Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 59. Marsden also includes an excellent graphic of the seven dispensations (64–65). For Scofield's systemization, see C. I. Scofield, ed., *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1901).

³³ See Scofield, *The Scofield Reference Bible*, Revelation 19:19 (n. 1); 1 Thessalonians 4:17 (n.1); 1 Corinthians 15:52 (n. 1).

³⁴ Applewhite and Nettles, "A Statement Prepared by The Two," 163. Mainstream dispensationalists believe that during each historical epoch, God related to human beings differently. The legal dispensation, for example, required humans to follow the Mosaic laws, whereas the Edenic dispensation merely required Adam and Eve's obedience to God. For Nettles and Applewhite, the "next level" related to humans differently during the five historical dispensations, predicated on the example given humanity by the figure for whom the epoch was named.

³⁵ Descriptions of the first through fifth dispensations appear in Applewhite and Nettles, "A Statement Prepared by The Two," 164–68. I cite their discussion of the sixth dispensation.

³⁶ Applewhite and Nettles, "A Statement Prepared by The Two," 169.

³⁷ Applewhite and Nettles, "A Statement Prepared by The Two," 169.

³⁸ Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 35, and ch. 2, n. 3.

³⁹ See Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 46.

⁴⁰ For more on Nettles' Christian upbringing, see Balch and Taylor, "Salvation in a UFO," 66. Unfortunately, Nettles never revealed the specific Baptist denomination to which she belonged, nor does the secondary literature indicate it. However, statistically speaking, she was most likely a Southern Baptist. A 1971 study showed that 37.5 percent of all Christians living in Texas declared their religious affiliation as Southern Baptist. No other Baptist group accounted for more than 0.1 percent of Texas Christians (see Douglas W. Johnson et. al., *Churches and Church Membership in the United States: An Enumeration by Region, State, and County* [Washington, D.C.: Glenmary Research Center, 1974], 11). The same study found that in the eight-county Houston region where Nettles grew up and resided, the second largest Baptist group, the Baptist Missionary Alliance, was only 2.3 percent the size of the Southern Baptist Convention (Johnson et. al., *Churches and Church Membership in the United State*, 193–204).

⁴¹ The 1984 survey revealed that 63 percent of Southern Baptist ministers self-characterized as premillennialists. Roughly half of those declared themselves dispensationalists (Helen Lee Turner and James L. Guth, "The Politics of

Armageddon: Dispensationalism among Southern Baptist Ministers,” in Ted G. Jelen, ed., *Religion and Political Behavior in the United States* [New York: Praeger, 1989], 190).

⁴² Nettles, quoted in Balch, “Bo and Peep,” 42.

⁴³ See Mojtabai, *Blessed Assurance*, especially chapters 11–14.

⁴⁴ Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970). Sales figures noted in William Martin, “Waiting for the End: the Growing Interest in Apocalyptic Prophecy,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (June 1982): 31.

⁴⁵ Steiger, “Interview,” 84.

⁴⁶ As Catherine Wessinger notes, the idealized extraterrestrials of Heaven’s Gate are functionally similar to the Masters of the Theosophical Society, who “were said to guide evolution on different planets through psychic influences” (personal communication with author, 30 November 2004). While this article highlights the many Christian elements in Heaven’s Gate, another fruitful avenue would be the prevalence of Theosophical motifs in Ti and Do’s thought. See also Wessinger’s discussion in *How the Millennium Comes Violently*, 239–40.

⁴⁷ *Beyond Human*, session 3, in *Heaven’s Gate: An Anthology*, sec. 4, p. 32.

⁴⁸ Describing the forty followers he interviewed, Balch writes that “before encountering the Two, all had defined themselves as spiritual seekers on a path to higher knowledge” (“Bo and Peep,” 25). The newsweeklies and periodicals following the 1997 mass suicides also describe the demographic makeup of the group in its final years on Earth. See also Balch, “Waiting for the Ships” 145, Balch and Taylor, “Salvation in a UFO,” 61.

⁴⁹ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), 46.

⁵⁰ Guru-based movements such as the Hare Krishna movement (ISKCON) or Siddha Yoga (SYDA Foundation) complicate this generalization. Yet, the very fact that these groups do emphasize the guru to such an extent precludes them from some definitions of the New Age movement. For excellent treatments of the New Age, see James R. Lewis and J. Gordon Melton, eds., *Perspectives on the New Age* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

⁵¹ Applewhite and Nettles, “First Statement.”

⁵² Balch and Taylor, “Seekers and Saucers: The Role of the Cultic Milieu in Joining a UFO Cult,” in *American Behavioral Scientist* 20, no. 6 (1977): 853.

⁵³ Balch and Taylor, “Seekers and Saucers,” 853.

⁵⁴ Applewhite and Nettles, “Prospective Candidate Letter,” retrieved online from www.rkkody.com/rkk/rkkomat.htm, accessed 13 November 1997 (now defunct); “Ruffles—‘Snacks for Thinkers,’” retrieved online from www.rkkody.com/rkk/rkkomat.htm, accessed 13 November 1997 (now defunct).

⁵⁵ Heaven’s Gate, “Organized Religion Has Become the Primary Pulpit for Misinformation and the Great ‘Cover Up’ (Poster),” in *Heaven’s Gate: An Anthology*, sec. 6, p. 6. Originally published in 1994.

⁵⁶ Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 82. Such a view is, of course, compatible with the strand of American religious voluntarism that has been chronicled as early as Robert Baird (*Religion in America*, New York: Harper and

Brother, 1844) and Alexis de Tocqueville (*Democracy in America*, London: Saunders and Otley, 1835).

⁵⁷ The few scholars who adopt the brainwashing conjecture would disagree with this statement. For the advantages of the individual choice approach, see James T. Richardson, "The Active vs. Passive Convert: Paradigm Conflict in Conversion/Recruitment Research," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 24, no. 2 (1985): 163–79; Lorne L. Dawson, "Self-Affirmation, Freedom, and Rationality: Theoretically Elaborating 'Active' Conversions," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 29, no. 2 (1990): 141–63. For the second generation of new religious movements, this generalization is less true. For excellent accounts of new religious movements' second generations, wherein some members never made the conscious choice to convert, see Susan J. Palmer and Charlotte E. Hardman, eds., *Children in New Religions* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

⁵⁸ Emphasis in the original. Phillip E. Hammond, *Religion and Personal Autonomy: The Third Disestablishment in America* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), 169. See also Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987); Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

⁵⁹ Applewhite and Nettles, "Prospective Candidate Letter." For curious readers, the entire letter to prospective candidates is 894 words long, containing 50 instances of "you" (5.6%) and 19 of "your" (2.1%).

⁶⁰ Applewhite and Nettles, "Prospective Candidate Letter."

⁶¹ Balch and Taylor, "Salvation in a UFO," 106.

⁶² Steiger, "Interview," 110.

⁶³ Balch, "'When the Light Goes out, Darkness Comes': A Study of Defection from a Totalistic Cult," in *Religious Movements: Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers*, ed. Rodney Stark (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1985), 21.

⁶⁴ Balch, "Waiting for the Ships," 154.

⁶⁵ Balch, "Waiting for the Ships," 154.

⁶⁶ Applewhite and Nettles, "Prospective Candidate Letter."

⁶⁷ Balch, "'When the Light Goes out, Darkness Comes,'" 21–23.

⁶⁸ See Steiger, "Interview," 95–96; Applewhite and Nettles, "Prospective Candidate Letter," and Applewhite and Nettles, "First Statement."

⁶⁹ Applewhite, '88 *Update*, sec. 3, p. 8.

⁷⁰ Catherine Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently*, 16–17.

⁷¹ Again, Hal Lindsey is an excellent example. A more contemporary example is the *Left Behind* series, written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins.

⁷² Steiger, "Interview," 98.

⁷³ *Beyond Human*, session 2, in *Heaven's Gate: An Anthology*, sec. 4, p. 20.

⁷⁴ *Beyond Human*, session 2, in *Heaven's Gate: An Anthology*, sec. 4, p. 21; emphasis in the original.

⁷⁵ Heaven's Gate, "'UFO' Cult Resurfaces With Final Offer," in *Heaven's Gate: An Anthology*, sec. 5, p. 3.

⁷⁶ Heaven's Gate, *Last Chance to Evacuate Earth Before It's Recycled*, VHS Videotape (26 September 1996); *Planet About to be Recycled—Your Only Chance to Survive*, VHS Videotape (5 October 1996). Transcripts of the tapes were available on the Heaven's Gate webpage, <www.heavensgate.com/misc/latest.htm>, accessed 13 November 1997.

⁷⁷ See especially *Beyond Human*, session 4.

⁷⁸ Steiger, "Interview," 89.

⁷⁹ Steiger, "Interview," 149.

⁸⁰ Applewhite, '88 *Update*, sec. 3, p. 12.

⁸¹ Applewhite, '88 *Update*, sec. 3, p. 12.

⁸² Heaven's Gate, "Exit Press Release," retrieved online from <www.heavensgate.com/pressrel.htm>, accessed 13 November 1997.

⁸³ Applewhite, '88 *Update*, sec. 3, p. 12.

⁸⁴ This language is prevalent in most of the Heaven's Gate documents, but see especially Brnody, "Up the Chain," in *Heaven's Gate: An Anthology*, Appendix A, p. 32.

⁸⁵ See Applewhite and Nettles, "Prospective Candidate Letter"; Applewhite and Nettles, "First Statement"; and Phelan, "Looking For: The Next World."

⁸⁶ Applewhite and Nettles, "Preparing For Service," retrieved online from <www.rkkody.com/rkk/rkkomat.htm>, accessed 13 November 1997 (now defunct).

⁸⁷ Neither term appears in earlier materials.

⁸⁸ Applewhite, '88 *Update*, sec. 3, p. 12.

⁸⁹ Applewhite, '88 *Update*, sec. 3, p. 12.

⁹⁰ Applewhite, "Do's Introduction: Our Purpose—The Simple Bottom Line," in *Heaven's Gate: An Anthology*, v.

⁹¹ *Beyond Human*, session 7, in *Heaven's Gate: An Anthology*, sec. 4, p. 83.

⁹² Quoted in Heaven's Gate, "Exit Press Release." This source paraphrases the King James Version.

⁹³ *Beyond Human*, session 11, in *Heaven's Gate: An Anthology*, sec. 4, p. 121.

⁹⁴ Applewhite attended Virginia's Union Theological Seminary (not to be confused with New York City's seminary of the same name) during its affiliation with the Presbyterian Church of the United States (PCUS), the southern branch of American Presbyterianism. In 1983, long after Applewhite had left the church, the PCUS merged with the United Presbyterian Church of the United States of America (UPCUSA) to form the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America (PCUSA), the largest national Presbyterian denomination.

⁹⁵ Westminster Assembly, "The Westminster Confession," 3:3. (1646)

⁹⁶ Westminster Assembly, "The Westminster Confession," 3:8. (1646)

⁹⁷ The Union Theological Seminary declined my request to release Applewhite's transcripts, and I have not been able to locate any additional information on his theological exposure while in attendance there.

⁹⁸ I have omitted Do's lengthy qualification that the Next Level only tags potential members during certain eras, further limiting the availability of salvation (see Applewhite, "Undercover 'Jesus' Surfaces before Departure," in *Heaven's Gate: An Anthology*, sec. 1, p. 5). Heaven's Gate posted this message to the Internet in January 1997.

⁹⁹ *Beyond Human*, session 1, in *Heaven's Gate: An Anthology*, sec. 4, p. 10.

¹⁰⁰ *Beyond Human*, session 1, in *Heaven's Gate: An Anthology*, sec. 4, p. 10.

¹⁰¹ Applewhite, "Do's Introduction," iii. See also the video *Last Chance to Evacuate Earth Before It's Recycled*, wherein Do declares, "We'll call those 'deposits,' for sake of understanding, the 'soul.'"

¹⁰² Heaven's Gate, "'95 Statement," sec. 1, p. 9.

¹⁰³ See n. 48 above.

¹⁰⁴ *Beyond Human*, session 11, in *Heaven's Gate: An Anthology*, sec. 4, p. 121.

¹⁰⁵ One can argue that Do incorporated numerous Christian elements into Heaven's Gate after Ti's death, e.g., biblical passages as proof-texts, a neo-Augustinian view of divine hierarchy, and the eventual identification of Ti as the Father and Do as the Son. However, these concepts existed inchoate during Nettles' lifetime. Further, Do expanded occult and New Age aspects of his thought as well, the most obvious of which is his fascination with UFOs, human metamorphosis, and spirits.

¹⁰⁶ The "Amendment to the Confession of Faith" states "In the Gospel God declares His love for the world and His desire that all men should be saved, reveals fully and clearly the only way of salvation; [God] promises eternal life to all who truly repent and believe in Christ." Presbyterian Church of the United States, "The Westminster Confession," 10:2. (*Minutes of the Eighty-First General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States* [Richmond: Presbyterian Committee on Publication, 1941], 112–13). For a discussion of the decline of the doctrines of election and predestination in the PCUS church, see Bryan V. Hillis, *Can Two Walk Together Unless They Be Agreed? American Religious Schisms in the 1970s* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1991), 10–13.

¹⁰⁷ See Balch, "Waiting for the Ships"; Balch, "'When the Light Goes out, Darkness Comes'."

¹⁰⁸ Balch, "Waiting for the Ships," 157. For more on the revolving door nature of Heaven's Gate, see their own material, especially the transcripts of their Last Call videocassette series, and *Beyond Human*, session 5, in *Heaven's Gate: An Anthology*, sec. 4, p. 52.

¹⁰⁹ Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956), 27.

¹¹⁰ Festinger et. al., *When Prophecy Fails*, 27. For an examination of Festinger's main points as well as an analysis of his study, see Jon R. Stone, ed., *Expecting Armageddon: Essential Readings in Failed Prophecy* (New York: Routledge, 2000), especially the chapters by Stone, Zygmunt, and Melton.

¹¹¹ Reformed theology is often summarized by the acronym TULIP: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, Perseverance of the saints.

¹¹² Heaven's Gate, "UFO Cult Emerges With Final Offer," in *Heaven's Gate: An Anthology*, sec. 5, p. 3. Originally published in *USA Today* (27 May 1993).

¹¹³ See Heaven's Gate, "Our Position Against Suicide," retrieved from <www.heavensgate.com/misc/letter.htm>, accessed 13 November 1997.

¹¹⁴ This is evident in nearly every document the group produced after 1993. For example, Jwnody's "Overview of the Present Mission" laments that "the weeds

have taken over the garden and truly disturbed its usefulness beyond repair—it is time for the civilization to be recycled—‘spaded under’” (Jwnody, “Overview of the Present Mission,” in *Heaven’s Gate: An Anthology*, ix. For the presence of the rhetoric of declension in evangelical culture, see *The Late Great Planet Earth*, especially chapters 10 and 14, as well as the Web site, *Rapture Ready* (<<http://raptureready.com>>), which documents declension in its “Rapture Index” and “End-Time Newsbites.” The classic American narratives of declension are, of course, the jeremiads of second-generation New England Puritans, most eloquently summarized and analyzed by Perry Miller, *Errand Into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1956).

¹¹⁵ Autopsies determined that the suicides began either late Saturday, 22 March, or early Sunday, 23 March. See Thomas, “Web of Death,” 32.

¹¹⁶ Balch and Taylor, “Making Sense of the Heaven’s Gate Suicides,” 223.

¹¹⁷ Thirty-five members of Heaven’s Gate taped personalized farewell messages in a video mailed to several former members and eventually released to the public.

¹¹⁸ The most obvious case of dehumanizing ridicule is perhaps Ted Turner’s comments that Heaven’s Gate was “a good way to get rid of a few nuts” (Reuters News Wire, 29 March 1997). *TIME*’s cover story was only slightly less dehumanizing, comparing the Heaven’s Gate dead to “laboratory specimens pinned neatly to a board” (Elizabeth Gleick, “‘The Marker We’ve Been Waiting For,’” *TIME*, [7 April 1997]: 31). In the same issue, Richard Lacayo’s “The Lure of the Cult” resorted to ridicule, describing Heaven’s Gate cosmology as “as infantile apocalypse, one part applesauce, one part phenobarbital” inspired by “insipid pop dust-jacket conventions” (45).