

[First published in *Chronicle of Higher Education* (April 25, 1997). Reprinted in Russell T. McCutcheon, ed., *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion* (London: Cassell, 1999), 390-94.]

Religious Studies and "Heaven's Gate": Making the Strange Familiar and the Familiar Strange

Mark W. Muesse

With the suicides of 39 members of the Heaven's Gate sect in Rancho Santa Fe, CA., the world confronted the enigma of yet another seemingly outlandish religious group. The more we learned about it, the stranger it appeared. Stories of ritualized death, castrations, and expectations of rescue operations by alien beings in spacecraft stretched the limits of our understanding. Even by the grotesque standards of the People's Temple in Jonestown and the Branch Davidians, Heaven's Gate seemed bizarre. But simply characterizing the group that way, I suggest, is both too easy and potentially hazardous. Tempting though it may be, we should not make Heaven's Gate so strange, so exotic that we lose sight of the ways the group's beliefs and practices are not that far removed from those adhered to by many "mainstream" Americans. As a student of religion, I believe that, at the very least, it might enhance the level of public debate if people acknowledged that some of their own beliefs and practices could appear strange to others.

It is true that the initial reports about Heaven's Gate made it easy to use the word "bizarre." We learned of the 39 bodies, all dressed in identical black outfits, neatly arrayed on cots and bunk beds. We learned of videotaped farewells by group members, serenely explaining to loved ones the reasons for their actions. Everything they said bespoke deliberation, intention, and absolute confidence that their deaths would convey them to the "next level." These were not the panic-driven suicides of Jonestown and Waco. We saw no indication of struggle, coercion, or second thoughts. No federal authorities were threatening the group. Members of Heaven's Gate seemed to welcome their deaths with the same equanimity and determination as any patient of Dr. Kervorkian's. Indeed, the rational way in which they approached their deaths made them seem ever more irrational.

Even the sexual overtones, which we have come to expect in cases such as these, were unusual. Instead of a sex-crazed leader who abused his disciples, as Jim Jones and David Koresh did, Marshall Applewhite, or, as he preferred "Do," emphasized sexual negation rather than sexual expression. Sexuality, he taught, was merely an aspect of the bodily container that would be sloughed off as believers passed to the next level "above human." The standard dress and buzz cuts were ways of diminishing sexual differences, just as castration for some of the men was a way of diminishing sexual desires. Do himself had been castrated, perhaps as a desperate effort to cope with his own homosexual proclivities, about which he felt apparent guilt.

Strangest of all was the group's science fiction mythology, blended with elements of Christianity and astrological divination. As the Heaven's Gate page on the World Wide Web explained, the appearance of the Hale-Bopp comet signaled the advent of extraterrestrials, whose starship in the comet's wake would rescue the faithful from Planet Earth. Yet the members of Heaven's Gate saw themselves as following the same pattern established 2,000 years ago, when Jesus of Nazareth discarded his physical vessel in exchange for a spiritual one. There was surely significance in the group's decision to exit this planet during the Christian Holy Week.

How have we made sense of these events? The most common strategy, one favored by the media and many citizens, has been to relegate Heaven's Gate and similar groups to the category "cult." Many people seem to take some comfort in the idea of a cult; the word effectively distances them from the unsettling activities of groups like Heaven's Gate. But cult is a term that I and many other religious studies scholars resist. Academics who study these phenomena are well aware of the absence of precise, universally accepted definition for "cult." I jokingly say a cult is any religion more bizarre than your own.

Bizarreness is a comparative term, not an absolute standard. We judge things as bizarre according to how much they diverge from our own way of seeing things, which we usually privilege as being closer to the truth than all others. But there is a potential danger in privileging our own point of view in this way--a danger that sometimes leads precisely to events such as the Heaven's Gate suicides. When we hallow our own perspective, we seal ourselves off from critical scrutiny, effectively isolating our beliefs just as sect members do locked away in a compound.

Among the many objectives and benefits of the academic study of religion, I find two aspirations of to be of particular value whenever the issue of "cults" looms large in the public imagination. One is that scholars in religious studies endeavor to make the strange familiar. We take ideas, beliefs, and practices that seem odd and try to show how they make sense to adherents, or at least how they operate within the framework of another construction of reality. We often do this by demonstrating how alien notions compare with more familiar beliefs and practices. For instance, it helps students to understand the caste system in India--which seems diametrically opposed to Western democratic ideals--to point out the ways our own society maintains a hierarchy of value based on a person's

race, sex, or economic situation. As with any analogy, the comparison is imperfect, but it is useful.

On the other hand, scholars in religious studies endeavor to make the familiar strange. By comparing other beliefs and practices with our own, we shed light on the assumptions and perspectives that we take for granted but which other people do not subscribe to. Our own values and beliefs--many of them unacknowledged until they are challenged--appear to us in a new light. This may even be the discipline's chief benefit. Long after students have forgotten the particulars of a religion's beliefs and practices, they will still remember how it felt to have their own view of the world challenged. While studying traditions that practice arranged marriages, for example, students might learn that other religions look upon the American dating scene with the same horror that many American students experience when they contemplate arranged marriages. To such students, aspects of the world that once seemed given are now seen to be mutable. Having once seen the strangeness of our worldview, it is difficult to return to it with the dogmatism of the true believer.

What does making the strange familiar and the familiar strange tell us about Heaven's Gate? Take just a few elements of this sect's worldview. There is nothing particularly startling or unusual about the group's finding ominous significance in the appearance of a comet. Across the centuries and across human cultures, scanning the heavens to discern the signs of the times has been the standard rather than the exception. Further, there is really nothing strange about sacrificing one's sexuality through celibacy and even castration. Anyone aware of the history of Christianity--or the history of virtually any religious tradition--knows that these are not uncommon practices for many faithful. The Apostle Paul clearly believed in the spiritual superiority of celibacy over marriage, a view still reflected today in the vows of Roman Catholic priests and nuns. Origen, one of Christianity's early theologians, even castrated himself to become a "eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:12). Finally, wearing identical clothing and haircuts and following a regimented life style is not a unique religious practice, either. The professional clergy and monastics in most religions do so, as do many lay people, such as the Amish.

Even the sci-fi mythology of Heaven's Gate is not as weird as it might appear at first blush. Millions of people do believe in extraterrestrials and alien visitations to Earth. These include sane, thoughtful individuals, not just readers of tabloids who seek the titillation of the eerie. Even if we find it difficult to accept the idea of alien visitations, let us at least consider whether some common religious beliefs might not seem a little strange to others. Is the idea that extraterrestrials will come to Earth to rescue believers really that much more implausible than the belief that a man who lived 2,000 years ago will return to Earth to rescue his followers? Tertullian, one of the great "fathers" of the early Christian church, had a firm grasp of this point. He maintained that the absurdity of Christian belief was, in fact, its virtue. Credo quia absurdum est, Tertullian is reported to have said: "I believe because it is absurd." I find it difficult to see how we can say one set of beliefs is based in reality and the other in purely cultish fantasy. Both seem to me to be equally rational or equally bizarre, depending on how one judges these matters. My point

is not to challenge Christian orthodoxy, but rather to challenge the casual tendency of many people, both religious and nonreligious, to brand the beliefs of others as outlandish, absurd, and bizarre while privileging their own perspectives.

One might, of course, grant all these points but argue that the real issue with Heaven's Gate is not the group's beliefs--however sane or irrational--but the fact that they led to a fatal conclusion. "Whether my beliefs are rational or not," we might imagine someone saying, "you don't see the members of my church reaching for the Phenobarbital and vodka." This, to be sure, is an important argument. But we might also consider other instances of religious beliefs leading to death. Throughout Christian history, for example, scores of martyrs have yielded their bodies to lions and gallows to serve what they believed to be a higher purpose. (When they have been unwilling to give up their own lives, they often have been all too willing to take the lives of others in the name of an ideal cause.) These dynamics are not limited, of course, to the Christian traditions. Jewish history honors Masada, where over 900 men, women, and children engaged in a mass suicide in 72 C.E. rather than succumb to Roman authority. In more recent decades, we have the example of Buddhist monks who immolated themselves in Vietnam during peace protests. We can easily find instances of similar events in other religious and nonreligious traditions. People throughout history have gone to war ready to sacrifice themselves to a higher ideal, such as "liberty" or "country." On what grounds do I say that my self-sacrifice is more rational and more noble than yours? The men and women at Rancho Santa Fe died in pursuit of the ideals of freedom and happiness.

Perhaps the lesson to be drawn is that we ought to abolish all religion. This is an age-old notion embraced by freethinkers everywhere. After all, is it not religion, as such, that drives people to mass suicides and crusades? Why not abandon all religious beliefs in favor of, say, a more enlightened, scientific perspective? The problem with this argument is that cruelty and absurd beliefs are not exclusive to religion. No realm of human culture--science and technology, law and government, education and scholarship--is immune to the destructive potential of "bizarre" notions. In the nineteenth century, modern science "proved" the intellectual inferiority of non-European races; in the 1930s and 1940s, the government of Germany acted on that belief. No, the lesson to draw from Heaven's Gate is not about finding the right belief. Our beliefs will always seem bizarre to someone, rational to ourselves. The lesson concerns what we believe about our beliefs. Can we ever afford to be so self-righteous that we cannot contemplate that our beliefs could appear strange or questionable to others; or to consider that we cling to them with perhaps too much intensity, that perhaps we love our beliefs too much?

It is important for us to resist the temptation to demonize the members of Heaven's Gate. Fascinated and repulsed at the same time, we may easily consign these events to the categories of "mystery" or "evil" or some other notion that effectively distances the group from us. Alienating "them" from "us" only serves to reinforce the smug belief in our rationality and their bizarreness. The members of the Heaven's Gate were human beings; they were us.