

Introduction

Black uniforms. Matching “Away Team” patches. New Nike shoes, the “Just Do It” swooshes still vibrant white. Purple shrouds. Rolls of quarters and five-dollar bills in their pockets, duffle bags at their sides. Circumscribing themselves with these elements, in March 1997, 39 people in Rancho Santa Fe, California, ritually terminated their lives. They did so in waves, with each wave cleaning and tidying after the previous, until all 39, including their founder and leader, lay dead in a multimillion-dollar mansion in a posh San Diego suburb. Days after the suicides began, a former member, tipped off by his compatriots as to their intentions, stumbled into and then quickly out of the house. The rest is history: Heaven’s Gate.

To outsiders, it was a mass suicide. For insiders, it was a graduation. This act was the culmination of more than two decades of religious and social development of the group, a movement that took several names over its years. It began as a loose collective formed by two self-proclaimed witnesses, Marshall Herff Applewhite and Bonnie Lu Nettles, and ended as Heaven’s Gate, the monastic religious movement still led by Applewhite. Along the way the group developed a complicated theology fusing Christian, New Age, and American cultural elements, and a set of religious practices likewise drawing from multiple religions, science fiction, and pop culture. The group ended on its own terms, but not without outside influence. Rumors of an unidentified flying object (UFO) or spacecraft trailing the Hale-Bopp comet precipitated the timings of the suicides, as

did years of dwindling success in attracting converts or even serious media interest.

This book answers the question of why the members of Heaven's Gate committed their ritual suicides. But it also asks and answers another set of questions. How did Heaven's Gate originate, and why did it evolve the way it did? What was its draw, and why did people join this group? What did members believe, and how did they develop practices within their religious worldview? How did all of this reflect the American society in which Heaven's Gate developed? I arrive at a variety of answers, which are developed in the pages that follow. The group originated from two individuals and their spiritual quests, but it also emerged out of Evangelical Christianity, the New Age movement, interest in science fiction and UFOs, and conspiracy theories. It evolved in keeping with those influences. People joined because they found in Heaven's Gate something that they felt was lacking in their previous lives. Heaven's Gate offered a chance to feel special and to identify with being an otherworldly spiritual being, a sort of angelic extraterrestrial. It never appealed to many people, but several hundred did join and leave over its history. Members believed, as many other Americans do, in a heavenly Father, the centrality of the soul rather than the body, a battle between good and evil, and heavenly salvation, but they reframed all these beliefs as referring to the literal heavens and extraterrestrial beings. They developed religious practices involving bodily control, prayer, and means of dwelling in this world while simultaneously trying to escape it. People stayed for different reasons, but once a member it would have been very difficult to choose to leave, since adherents believed outsiders lived worthless vegetative lives and would not achieve any form of eternal salvation. (That being said, the majority of people who joined did leave eventually.) The movement reflects American society by revealing some of the same forces at play in bigger, more recognizable, more publicly accepted religions. Heaven's Gate was American culture writ small.

The basic argument of this book is that Heaven's Gate reflected, responded to, and sewed together various strands of American religious thought and practice. I want to admit at the very beginning of the book a methodological bias in my approach. It is somewhat reductionist, by which I mean that I interpret the religious revelations of the

leaders and members of Heaven's Gate as manifestations of something else: culture. Rather than assume the position of the leaders of Heaven's Gate that their religious doctrines and positions are the result of direct communication with what they called the Next Level—effectively what most other religious people would call Heaven—I root their religious developments in history and culture. This is not to say that I deny their religious claims, merely that I proceed under the assumptions that such claims—like those of all religious groups—are beyond the realm of empirical observation and therefore cannot be assessed by outside observers. Scholars who take this approach are certainly within the mainstream when we look at new religious movements, but we must admit that the approach is somewhat offensive to the religious believer. For example, many Christians would be offended at the contention by some scholars that the early Church leaders stitched together various doctrines and approaches of Jewish, Roman, Greek, Persian, and Egyptian religion and constructed what we call Christianity. Christians prefer to think of their religion as derived from revelation and a divine plan. Some adherents of Heaven's Gate might react the same way to this book.

It is, however, the best approach. Setting aside whether the claims of the founders of Heaven's Gate or any other religion really derive from supernatural sources—claims that cannot be proven one way or another—it is hard to deny that the culture and society in which a religion develops shape its ultimate form, worldview, practices, and even beliefs. Scholars have proven this beyond doubt for the major religions of the world, all of which were once new religions. In the often-studied examples of Christianity and Judaism, historian of ancient religions Alan Segal has persuasively demonstrated the manner in which a mixing of ancient Near Eastern cultural forces shaped formative Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity as they emerged in late antiquity. For Segal, “their social, economic, and political context,” or “the real social matrix in which religious thought existed” fundamentally shaped how these two major religions developed.¹ Esteemed and recognized scholars of Judaism and Christianity such as Jacob Neusner, Daniel Boyarin, and Bart D. Ehrman have all made similar arguments and claims about these two religions, and represent the academic consensus.² Religions emerge out of cultural environments and social conditions, and must

be understood with reference to those conditions, not as *sui generis* entities.

So too for new religious movements (NRMs), the study of which led to the emergence of a new field of scholarship in the mid- to late twentieth century. The first wave of scholarship on NRMs paid extensive attention to how social forces and conditions impacted their development. Some of the earliest and most foundational studies considered issues of social transformations such as new trends in college education, population shifts, and delayed adolescence in the formation of the NRMs that seemed to sweep through Western society in the 1960s and 1970s.³ Scholars also paid attention to how culture shaped these emergent religions, with special attention to the counterculture and its elements of free love, drug use, spiritual exploration, and utopian communal experiments.⁴ All of these cultural and social developments influenced the NRMs that emerged out of them in the 1960s and 1970s. This remains true for new religious movements such as Heaven's Gate that emerged and developed into their final form in the late 1970s into the 1980s.

Why Study Heaven's Gate?

When people learn that I've been writing a book on Heaven's Gate they usually want to know why. Wasn't this a small group, just under forty people, which killed itself off in a far corner of America's West Coast? Since the group is now long gone, why bother studying them now? I have some sympathy for these sorts of questions, since there seem to be so many important contemporary trends in American religion that merit serious attention, trends upon which scholars like me perhaps should focus instead of studying a small group of dead people. Why not consider the rising number of Americans who consider themselves "none of the above" when asked about their religious affiliation (the "nones"), a group that represents up to a fifth of the U.S. population according to one recent study?⁵ Why not study the rise of Evangelicalism, Fundamentalism, and the various forms of conservative American religiosity that have had such a powerful impact on American politics and society? What of the fusion of religion and popular culture, of individuals who find spiritual satisfaction in bookstores, movies, science, and other individually focused activities?

These are good questions, and good research topics. And, in fact, this study of Heaven's Gate is just another way of answering the same questions and considering similar themes, since it uncovers the religious transformations and developments that occurred during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s that led to these new characteristics within American religion. The religious "nones," for example, reject the forms of institutionalized, denominationalized, professionalized religion that members of Heaven's Gate did as well, and they engage in the same sort of search for alternatives as did the movement's adherents. Likewise, the same forces that helped Evangelicalism rise and become so prominent also helped Heaven's Gate, just as some of the same theologies of being set apart and looking toward heavenly rewards shaped these two very different movements. And members of Heaven's Gate certainly reflected—and pre-dated—the recent turn toward various forms of popular culture and individual spiritual quests as sources of religious truths. All this is to say that, although the group was small and is now defunct, the study of Heaven's Gate reveals some very important facets of American religious culture.

But beyond that, I have found that nearly everyone with whom I have spoken regarding this group and my research has agreed that Heaven's Gate is intriguing and merits a detailed analysis. People find it so fascinating and interesting because it is the sort of transgressive religious movement that seems so utterly foreign and strange that it defies explanation, yet makes the same sort of trite claims of offering salvation, eternal life, and heavenly rewards that bombard Americans every day on the airwaves, public squares, billboards, and streets. Heaven's Gate's basic message of offering heavenly salvation and leaving behind a broken life on Earth is not that far removed from the message offered by most forms of American Christianity, yet its specific form of salvation and the means of achieving it transgress the basic assumptions of most Americans. One simply does not wait for the arrival of flying saucers to escape the Earth's atmosphere, and one does not commit suicide to force the issue. This mixture of religious banality and religious transgression marks Heaven's Gate as innately interesting to many people. Put another way: the study of a group offering eternal heavenly rewards is not particularly new or noteworthy, nor does it attract much outside interest. The study of a group making seemingly bizarre claims about

space aliens and suicide is noteworthy but also foreign and strange. Yet when one combines the two, one discovers a group that is simultaneously foreign and familiar, exotic and ordinary.

Finally, there is another reason that I have written about Heaven's Gate. Members of the movement sought above all else to transcend their humanity. They tried to dehumanize themselves and become extraterrestrial heavenly beings. Ironically, after their death the media and broader public sentiment did the same thing: dehumanized them. Journalists, comedians, media commentators, and religious leaders engaged in rhetorical attacks on the Heaven's Gate dead, dismissing them as crazy, delusional, and better off dead. Yet these were thirty-nine human beings who died in Rancho Santa Fe, and they had histories, feelings, and religious beliefs and practices. In other words, they had a story. This book tells their story.

But Weren't Members of Heaven's Gate Brainwashed?

This book's method of study focuses on unpacking the worldview, beliefs, and practices of members of Heaven's Gate. Yet many in the media and public consider this group a cult, filled with brainwashed victims rather than real religious adherents. One might raise an obvious objection about studying the group in the way I do: weren't members simply brainwashed into believing and practicing what they did, and therefore the specifics are somewhat irrelevant? Would they not have believed and done anything? In a word: no. In somewhat more words: members of Heaven's Gate chose to join a group that significantly curtailed their freedoms and ultimately asked of them their lives, but they did so because they felt that they were making the best choice they could. To quote Nichelle Nichols, the actress who played Uhura in the *Star Trek* series much beloved by members of Heaven's Gate, and the sister of one of the adherents who had committed suicide, "[m]y brother was highly intelligent and a beautifully gentle man. He made his choices and we respect those choices."⁶ While one does not need to accept the decisions made by members of the group, one must still accept them as decisions.

The contemporary academic theories of conversion, socialization, and what one might call "brainwashing" (though few scholars call

it that any more) admit that the process works better to keep people engaged within a religious system they have already accepted than it does to explain why they joined in the first place, though one should be clear that most scholars in fact reject the very notion of brainwashing as pseudoscientific.⁷ As we will see, the idea of brainwashing originated in the Cold War era as an explanation for why some captive American soldiers had defected to North Korea, and at its base it is a theory that assumes its victims are prisoners of war subjected to torture, confinement, sensory and nutritional deprivation, and a single-minded attempt to manipulate them. This model does not work very well outside of the prisoner-of-war scenario, as numerous sociologists of religion have noted.⁸ Members of Heaven's Gate were not physically confined, nor were they tortured or forcibly imprisoned.⁹ During the formative stage of the group's history, its members seldom even saw their leaders. The traditional model does not work.

This is not to say that members of Heaven's Gate were not influenced by their leaders, nor that one can so easily dismiss various theories of psychological persuasion. Clearly the leaders of Heaven's Gate engaged in acts of religious persuasion. They used adherents' emotions, preexisting convictions, hopes, and fears to attract them to join the movement and stay within it, though it must be noted that they also encouraged members who seemed to be waffling to leave. This is of course basic advertising, and one finds the same process at work in most religious movements. Heaven's Gate represents an extreme example because the group's leaders demanded so much from their followers and offered far more in return. According to the rational choice model of religious social dynamics, this sort of trade-off of high demands and high rewards functions to attract a niche of serious spiritual seekers, just as very costly commercial goods (expensive cars or foods) also attract niche consumers.¹⁰ This also helps explain why Heaven's Gate remained so small. Members joined not because of some sort of magical psychological or spiritual trick that the leaders conjured, but because they were looking for something and believed that they found it in Heaven's Gate.

Yet members did report that the leaders of the group were special, and this specialness can help explain why individuals stayed in the group even though so much was asked of them. The founders and leaders of Heaven's Gate, Marshall Herff Applewhite and Bonnie Lu

Nettles, exerted a powerful influence and control over their followers that scholars of religion call charisma. In Max Weber's formulation, charisma is "a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader."¹¹ While much of this definition and approach relies upon highly subjective observation and interpretation, first-hand accounts of Applewhite's and Nettles' leadership indicated that the two exerted profound charismatic authority and leadership over their followers. While this does not support the idea of brainwashing, it does indicate why some people joined the movement. It also helps explain why some people stayed, since those who left would immediately lose access to the powerful charisma of the movement's leaders and the ensuing feeling of connection to the "superhuman," in Weber's words. Yet others who joined did so without ever having met Nettles or Applewhite, so one can hardly argue that charisma alone accounts for the rise of Heaven's Gate.

Still, while the two leaders' charisma functioned to solidify their authority, it was the content of their religious teachings—namely beliefs and practices—that adherents used to structure their lives and seek transcendence. It is those aspects of the religious system of Heaven's Gate that are considered here. At its heart, this book presents two basic arguments. First, there is a reason that Heaven's Gate began, developed, and ended the way it did. The movement's history and the story of its religious evolution must be understood as integral to understanding why the members of Heaven's Gate ended their earthly lives the way they did. A lack of attention to the lives and history of the movement's members before the suicides leads to a failure to understand why people joined, stayed, and died as they did, and why many more stayed for a while but then left. Second, I argue that Heaven's Gate was not a complete aberration. It reflected many of the same currents at work in American culture and society. Culture and society shaped the movement, and only with reference to them can we understand it. The afterword of this book extends and flips this argument, showing that the

study of Heaven's Gate also reveals certain aspects of American culture and society.

The first chapter, "The Cultural and Religious Origins of Heaven's Gate," considers the manner in which the movement that eventually took the name of Heaven's Gate arose and developed. It is the only strictly chronological chapter in the book, and looks to how the two co-founders of the movement developed a new religious synthesis and social movement based on their individual spiritual pursuits. I argue in this chapter that Heaven's Gate reflected not only the idiosyncratic perspectives and experiences of its founders but also the cultural context of its time. Specifically I look to the religious context within which both founders moved and operated, including the theosophical tradition, New Age spiritual seeking, and an apocalyptic-oriented Christianity. I trace the development of the movement from its two co-founders to its eventual fruition into an inchoate social movement that grew, shrunk, then coalesced into a roving monastic community. This initial chapter ends roughly with the summer of 1976, when the movement went "off the grid" and ended its active engagement with the outside world. The only other generally chronologically organized chapter in this book, the final one, likewise considers only the end of the movement.

Sandwiched between these historically oriented chapters are four thematic considerations of Heaven's Gate. The first of these, "The Spiritual Quest and Self-Transformation: Why People Joined Heaven's Gate," looks to why and how individuals converted into the Heaven's Gate movement. In following the original sociological scholarship that Robert W. Balch and David Taylor produced in the first year of the movement, I argue that members joined because they were spiritual seekers on quests for religious truth. Heaven's Gate offered an opportunity to embrace that quest, but it also offered a certainty and finality that allowed adherents to end their spiritual quests and commit to a single religious path. Looking to the movement's converts from the 1990s I find the same pattern. Finally, this chapter considers the approach of Janja Lalich and her model of bounded choice, which offers some perspective on why members stayed within the movement but is of only limited value in considering their trajectories into the group.

The third chapter looks to what scholars of religion call the worldview of Heaven's Gate. Heaven's Gate emerged out of two theological worlds: Evangelical Christianity and the New Age movement, particularly the sub-movement within the New Age tradition concerned with alien visitations and extraterrestrial contact. Heaven's Gate's leaders and members drew from a broad array of influences, including secular ufology (the subculture of people interested in UFOs), science fiction, and conspiracy theories, in addition to their religious influences. I argue in this chapter that such bricolage or pastiche reflects contemporary postmodern culture, but I disagree with scholars who envision the movement's bricolage as an end in and of itself. Rather, underlying Heaven's Gate's postmodern pastiche of ufology, Christianity, the New Age, science and technology, and science fiction was a single ideal of what I call an *extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutic*. The adherents of Heaven's Gate read the Christian Bible (primarily the New Testament) through a fundamental set of assumptions shaped by their various influences, but framed by Christian assumptions. My approach in this chapter resolves a scholarly debate over the nature of the Heaven's Gate movement as either fundamentally Christian or New Age.

Chapter 4 turns to the specific beliefs that adherents of Heaven's Gate upheld. Members created a system of beliefs that contained all the usual hallmarks of a religious theology, namely beliefs about salvation (soteriology), the order of the universe (cosmology), and the end of things (eschatology). As a Christian group, they also developed an understanding of the nature of Jesus (Christology). From the perspective of Heaven's Gate members, their beliefs provided them with meaning, identity, and a sense of their place in the universe. This chapter pays special attention to the development of the movement's millennialism, specifically the way in which the group adopted and adapted a form of Protestant Christian apocalypticism called premillennial dispensationalism. It also traces how Applewhite and Nettles successfully transformed their movement's theology at several points when their apocalyptic predictions failed to materialize, and how after Nettles's death Applewhite was able to fundamentally transform Heaven's Gate's vision of the nature of the human self and the form that salvation would take. This more than any other shift permitted the eventual adoption of a theology of suicide and propelled members to believe that their beliefs

demanding of them that they lay down their lives if they truly desired eternal salvation.

While beliefs are important, so too are religious practices. Chapter 5 considers the development of the religious practices within Heaven's Gate, particularly the manner in which adherents used these practices to structure their terrestrial lives with reference to the extraterrestrial salvation that they sought. I make use of historian and cultural theorist Thomas A. Tweed's theorization of religion as a constellation of practices related to crossing and dwelling, showing how members both dwelt in religiously created homes and sought to cross to an idealized home in the heavens. Since self-transformation lay at the heart of Heaven's Gate's religious message from its very first days until the end of the movement's history, unsurprisingly, practices aimed at self-transformation lay at the heart of the group's religious practices. Self-transformative practices of dwelling included building communal homes, members rhetorically transforming their homes into spacecraft, and recreating the individual as a monastic member of a crew. Self-control and self-purging also served central roles in the lives of members of Heaven's Gate and in their daily religious practices as they sought to cross out of this world into that of the eternal salvation of the Next Level. This included techniques such as prayer, fasting, meditation, and astrology.

The final core chapter, "Why Suicide?: Closing Heaven's Gate," focuses on why the group's members were led by their convictions to embrace a theology of suicide as the best option for securing eternal salvation. I trace the development of a metaphysically and culturally dualistic worldview within the movement and an increase in pessimism toward the outside world and its value. This relates to transformations within the group's apocalyptic thought and its context, as well as the advent of conspiratorial thinking within Heaven's Gate and the broader social context of such thought, especially as Michael Barkun has recently traced in American society. I therefore conclude that dualistic thinking about the self and the world, a pessimistic outlook and the experience of rejection by outsiders, failed expectations about a potential government raid on the group, and the mass public attention to the Hale-Bopp comet and an alleged UFO trailing the comet all led to the eventual suicides.

The book concludes with an afterword that positions Heaven's Gate as representative of many of the same forces shaping the broader American religious environment and religions in the United States. I argue that Heaven's Gate was American religion wrought small, a social barometer that revealed the religious climate at the turn of twenty-first-century America. This includes aspects such as the centrality of biblical interpretation, Christian primitivism, spiritual seeking, and alternative spiritual practices, appeals to science and scientific legitimacy, and apocalyptic thinking.

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When considering the overall argument and thrust of this book, a related set of ideas should emerge as most pertinent. First, Heaven's Gate must be studied within the context of its emergence, growth, and death. Biographers take the same approach when studying their subjects, indicating how individuals reflect their cultural, historical, and social contexts, but also reveal those same contexts through crystallizing such forces into a single life. I see Heaven's Gate as doing something analogous, and this book aims for the same sort of contextualization that one finds in a biography. Heaven's Gate both reflects the context of its environment—Christian apocalypticism, New Age spiritual practices, the religious quests of baby boomers, new religions of the counterculture, the narcissistic pessimism of the 1990s—as well as reveals how those forces interacted in the form of a single religious body.

Second, this book should make clear that we need to take seriously the religious beliefs, practices, worldviews, and life choices of adherents of alternative, belittled, and discredited religious movements. It is far too easy to dismiss the members of Heaven's Gate as either insane or victimized, and in both cases we fall into the same sort of trap of demonization that colors the dehumanizing political discourse of the twenty-first century.

Third, this book has a historiographic point as well. The study of new religious movements has long been ghettoized within the academic study of religion. Scholars of NRMs—such as myself—have formed our own academic groups, journals, and associations. While these are appropriate processes for any subfield within the study of religion, it has

unfortunately meant that the study of individual new religious groups tends to become linked only to the study of other NRMs. We not only assume that the context of our study includes other new religions, but we tend to reify the concept of “new religious movement” as a sort of distinct type of religion that sets it—and us, as scholars of the phenomenon—apart from other religions and their study.

This book is not about new religious movements, though Heaven’s Gate is of course one such group. Rather, this book is about a group, its religious history, and its religious environment. I do not see Heaven’s Gate as representative of a reified category of NRM, but as an indicator of American culture and society. The implicit argument of this book is that scholars must study new religions as parts of broader religious environments and not as stand-alone movements. Heaven’s Gate has more in common with other religious movements of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s in the United States—Christian Evangelicals and yoga practitioners, for example—than it does new religious movements of other times and places.

Finally, a note on sources, and another on language: one reason that scholars have written comparatively little on Heaven’s Gate—as opposed to groups such as the Branch Davidians or Peoples Temple—is the relative paucity of sources. No proper Heaven’s Gate archives exist, and few publicly assessable collections hold materials produced by the group. I have made use of the few available archival materials, held in the Special Collections at the University of California Santa Barbara’s American Religions Collection. Several published interviews also exist, as well as various news stories produced by reporters over the years. The articles written by sociologists Robert W. Balch and David Taylor based on their ethnographic fieldwork in the group in the 1970s are most helpful. Several journalists and non-academic historians have produced histories and assessments of the movement, notable Rodney Perkins and Forrest Jackson’s *Cosmic Suicide: The Tragedy and Transcendence of Heaven’s Gate* (1997) and Bill Hoffmann and Cathy Burke’s *Heaven’s Gate: Cult Suicide in San Diego* (1997). Since neither book is properly peer reviewed, and both are rather sensationalistic, I have not used these books themselves, but rather mined them for the primary sources that the authors themselves had uncovered. In all cases, I have verified any materials that I first encountered from these books or other media sources.

But most of the materials I have used in writing this book come directly from the movement itself: its 1997 self-published anthology and the videos that the movement produced in its final half decade, including a twelve-part series in 1992 and two hour-long instructional videos produced in the last year of Heaven's Gate's existence, audio tapes from 1982 to 1985, and interviews and statements made by ex-members. Some of the most useful of the sources are the "Exit Videos," the videotaped messages left by members just before their suicides. Some have called these video suicide notes, but I prefer to think of them as videotaped epistles. Like letters, they are exhortative and pedagogical, offering instruction and advice to those left behind after the members have left the Earth. For a short window of time, adherents believed, heaven's gate remained open. These intensely heartfelt Exit Videos called for family, friends, and the general public to follow members through that gate. I have also spoken with, interviewed, and exchanged emails with numerous former members, all of whom have provided details into the history and development of this religious group.

Those exchanges made it very clear to me that my use of religious studies language differs greatly from the language within the group. What I call a ritual, members called an exercise. What I call prayer, they called focusing. What I call a religious movement, they called a class, and what I call members, they called students. I have continued to use the language most familiar to scholars of religion, but I do wish to note from the onset that the members of Heaven's Gate—or students in the Class, to use their terminology—would not have used the same words. Ex-members have nevertheless recognized the same phenomenon behind the different labels. Even Applewhite himself admitted that such labels were appropriate, remarking on how the group did not refer to itself as a religion, but that it certainly fit the definition.¹²

The most notable case of a fundamental difference in language, and one that reflects a basic difference between the worldview of members of Heaven's Gate and the majority of those outside, involves the suicides themselves, which members and ex-members refer to as "exits." For members, the true self transcended the body, and death of the body seemed almost inconsequential. I do not support suicide, religious or otherwise, but in listening to the voices of the adherents of Heaven's Gate I have taken seriously their religious claims. While keeping in

mind the tragic end of this new religious movement, this book focuses equally on its beginning and middle. In doing so one discovers how much Heaven's Gate reflected American culture, and how its development represents a story of the birth, life, and death of an American new religion. Heaven's Gate is not just a suicide cult, as it is often called. Heaven's Gate is America's UFO religion.