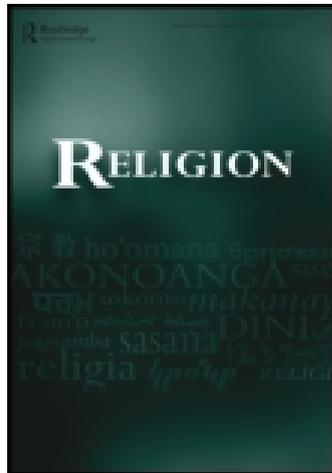


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Reconceptualising the human body: Heaven's Gate and the quest for divine transformation

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Reconceptualising the human body: Heaven's Gate and the quest for divine transformation

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Abstract

The mass suicide of the members of Heaven's Gate in 1997 stimulated much debate about the causes of so extreme an end to a new religious movement. Using primary source materials in conjunction with existing research, I present in this article an in-depth analysis of both the belief system and the behaviours of the members of the group. By using the sociology of the body and a psychobiography of the group leader, Marshall Applewhite, I show how ideas about the human body derived from individual psychopathology were translated into group belief and action. I argue that the relationship among these variables created the circumstances that led thirty-nine persons to believe that they were leaving this planet for a better existence in a parallel dimension.

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Believing that there was nothing more for them to accomplish on Earth, thirty-nine persons willingly took their own lives on March 1997 in a San Diego suburb. For these individuals, death was welcome and represented the shedding of earthly bodies so that their true entities could be released to Heaven. The members of the Heaven's Gate group, along with their leader, Marshall Herff Applewhite, had been preparing for the event for some time. In fact, for over a quarter century, Applewhite had been redefining the meaning of life in preparation for death. In this article, I show how Marshall Applewhite and his partner, Bonnie Lu Nettles, created a group that maintained social cohesion through a complex series of relationships involving on the one hand ideas about the body and sexual identity and on the other hand a belief system based on Christian doctrine and extra-terrestrial life. I explore how Marshall Applewhite's personal issues with his

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own body and sexual identity permeated the belief system that he and Nettles established. Furthermore, I propose that the problems of sexual identity that Applewhite suffered, and their subsequent translation into group teachings, were exacerbated by the mental health problem that he endured—namely, paranoid schizophrenia.

By exploring issues related to sexuality and mental health, I examine the ways in which the body exists as a complex reflection of personal and group beliefs. I identify how the adherents perceived their own bodies and how this understanding influenced their perception of their social worlds. My use of a ‘sociology of the body’ approach allows me to draw on a variety of research that looks at the human body both from the perspective of the individual and from the perspective of the group. Moreover, some contemporary research explicitly addresses the body from a religious perspective, a position that I employ in the study of newer religious movements.

Pivotal to understanding the origins of the centrality of the body within the Heaven’s Gate belief system is the study of Marshall Applewhite. His social and psychological history reveals a troubled individual who desperately sought to overcome his inner torments. I submit that Applewhite’s lifelong struggles with his own sexuality, coupled with his mental health problems, contributed to the doctrines that he developed. Thus a psychobiographical approach is an important component to realise why the body emerged as the focus of the group’s attention. Whereas social theories of the body help to explain the effects of the Heaven’s Gate belief system, a psychobiography helps to elucidate the origins of it.

Several academic studies exist on Heaven’s Gate, but none takes the approach that I enlist here. Robert Balch and David Taylor, for example, have examined Heaven’s Gate intermittently over a quarter century. In ‘Salvation in a UFO’ (1976) they recounted the group’s early days and its first brush with public interest. They described the kind of person who converted to the group and what they gave up in order to do so. Moreover, they based the account on their own experience of the group, having spent several weeks travelling with them. The following year Balch and Taylor discussed the group’s attraction to new recruits in ‘Seekers and Saucers: The Role of the Cultic Milieu in Joining a UFO Cult’ (R.W. Balch and Taylor, 1977).

Three years later, Balch (1980) studied the maintenance of group members in terms of role theory, noting some persons willingness to embrace the roles that Applewhite and Nettles presented them. Members welcomed the sense of purpose they received in training for a transcendental state of being. When Balch re-analysed the group in 1995, he used drift theory and social influence theory to examine commitment and control. Following the tragic end of the group in 1997, Balch and Taylor (2002) collaborated again to write a full descriptive history of the group’s development. They frequently mentioned the body as a central part of the group’s belief system but did not *analyse* the place of the body. Similarly, the authors mentioned Applewhite’s visions and his claim that he heard voices, but they did not analyse them. More recently, Winston Davis (2000) studied the group by examining the role of religious obedience in maintaining group cohesion. Hugh Urban (2000) researched Heaven’s Gate from a technological perspective, interpreting the group as a response to ‘the cold and sterile world of cyberspace’ (Urban, 2000, p. 270). Janja Lalich (2004) discussed the group using her ‘bounded choice’ model, which examines the nature of adherent commitment within high-demand groups by observing the array of factors at work in these situations.

While each of these perspectives contributes to the understanding of Heaven’s Gate, none of them analyses either the importance of Applewhite’s alleged mental illness or the importance

that the group placed on the body. My use of social theories of the body and my psychobiography of Applewhite is intended to show an as yet unexplored dimension of the group.

Theoretical perspectives

Social theories of the body

Literature on the body from non-religious perspectives is quite extensive, and much of it takes a phenomenological, philosophical or historical approach.¹ In addition, sociologists Bryan Turner (1992, 1994, 1997) and Anthony Synott (1993) have written extensively on the religiously mediated social ordering of bodies. In the introduction to her edited volume on *Religion and the Body* 1997, Sarah Coakley reminds us that the body has a long and complex history in the various religious traditions that have emerged over the centuries and that we need to use many approaches to study the body in a religious context.

Many religious historians, have examined the role of the human body.² Thus many publications analyse the role of the human body and its connection to salvation and redemption, particularly during biblical times and the Middle Ages. These issues often are highly pertinent to approaches to the body in some new religious movements. Many more studies examine the nature of the body within different religious traditions, but this form of investigation remains the purview of theological and historical rather than sociological and psychological discussion.

In 1990 Meredith McGuire made a plea to sociologists of religion to engage social theories of the body: ‘The social sciences of religion could be transformed by taking seriously the fact that humans are embodied’ (McGuire, 1990, p. 283):

Present social science conceptions of our subjects are particularly disembodied. Whether we are analyzing individual believers or religious organizations or religious ideas, the relationship of humans to their own bodies and to the bodies of others is remote or altogether absent from most of our work. How might our understanding of religion be different if we proceeded as though the people involved had bodies? (McGuire, 1990, pp. 283–4)

Moreover, McGuire called for a holistic approach that understands the body in social, cultural, psychological and biological terms.

McGuire identified a number of reasons that the study of the human body is important to the sociology of religion. Our bodies are an integral part of our social self and thus affect our notions of self. Agency, or the lack thereof, is vital to our experiences. As matter, our bodies are the means by which we experience physical sensations. Through our bodies we interpret our reality and the physical world around us. As a result, our bodies are subject to an enormous variety of experiences, not least suffering, pain and pleasure. Our bodies contribute to the construction and ‘reflection of social meanings’ within particular social settings. Moreover, within any given context, the body plays an important role in ‘power relations’ (McGuire, 1990, pp. 284–5). More generally, social theories of the body offer a framework in which we can examine the group

¹ For example, see Feher, Naddaff and Tazi (1990), Leder (1990), and Welton (2001).

² For example, see Eisler (1996), Kaelber (1998), Ranke-Heinemann (1990), von Thaden (2003), Walker Bynum (1996) and Wiesner-Hanks (2000).

members not only for their spiritual beliefs but also for their bodily experiences as they relate to those beliefs (see McGuire, 1990, pp. 283–4).

While some scholars are bringing the body to the sociology of religion, the research literature on new religious movements offers scant discussion on the role of the body. Some scholars mention the body as an issue within a particular group but do not then analyse the topic.³ I use McGuire's observations as a framework for my analysis of the body in Heaven's Gate.

I supplement McGuire's insights with the work of other theorists who discuss the body and embodied experience. For example, Alan Radley (1996) looked to the location of bodies in their social contexts and to the ways in which persons perceive their bodily experiences within those contexts. Radley's discussion of shared meanings, shared behaviours and social norms directs his distinction between 'body' and 'embodiment'. He reminds us that through social interactions our bodies reveal much about our specific social setting. Although Radley does not discuss the body and embodiment in terms of religion, his reflections supplement McGuire's criteria and are most useful to my discussion.

Psychobiographical profile: the history of the individual

'The dead cannot be interviewed'. (Bainton, 1977, p. 19)

Psychiatrist Alfred Honig stated that Applewhite's behaviour bore all the hallmarks of schizophrenia (see Honig interviewed in Broder, 1997). I will illustrate some of the main features of Applewhite's personal history that support this conclusion. I will discuss the characteristics of schizophrenia as they relate to Applewhite's obsessions with the body. Applewhite incorporated these beliefs and behaviours into his group theology.

The establishment of a relationship between religious leaders and group doctrines has scholarly precedent. Various researchers have investigated the psychological profiles of religious leaders in order to understand the social identity of the group.⁴ More generally, researchers have written psychological histories and profiles in many disciplines, including religion, criminology, art history, military history, and pop culture.⁵ Furthermore, Anthony Storr recognises that it is difficult to determine unconventional beliefs from psychopathology. Bizarre beliefs in and of themselves are not sufficient to establish psychological problems. One must look also to other factors such as authoritarianism, self-absorption and control.

Psychologist Michael Howe asserts that 'The author of a psychobiography starts from the position that psychology can help the biographer to understand the forces that drives a person's thoughts and actions' (Howe, 1997, p. 236). This statement echoes my desire to understand the psychological make-up of Marshall Applewhite.

³ The one notable exception that I have found is in David Chidester (1988), in which he explicitly addresses the role of the body in People's Temple. He specifically examines the ways how Jim Jones regimented the diet, sleep, sex, work and leisure of his members. Reflecting on Jones's socialist goals, Chidester comments: 'The physical body was sacrificed in order that this social body might live and grow' (Chidester, 1988, p. 122). Furthermore, he notes that Jones frequently compared the body with a 'weapon in the revolutionary struggle' (Chidester, 1988, p. 127).

⁴ See Clarke (1988); Erikson (1958); Kent (1994, 2004); Stark and Bainbridge (1985, p. 174–7), Storr (1996).

⁵ See, for example, Anderson (1999), Gonen (2000) and Nagera (1967).

Howe (1997) Howe's open approach leaves room for the individual preferences of the researcher. Furthermore, he offers some basic information on how psychological findings help researchers understand the development of an individual. Although he discusses the usefulness of psychological profiles for understanding genius, his guidelines are applicable to other avenues of study. Moreover, he addresses not only those researchers with a background in psychology but also those from other arenas who wish to engage in a fuller understanding of an individual (see Howe, 1997, p. 240). Howe asserts that 'psychological findings can make it possible to explain events that to anyone ignorant of them may appear mysterious and inexplicable' (Howe, 1997, p. 238). Moreover, he maintains that psychological findings reveal that, as researchers, we should not overemphasise any one event in a person's life. He points to the ways that some biographers have mistakenly attributed too much to an incident. He observes that 'often unnoticed routine background events of a person's life are in many respects far more influential than the more dramatic foreground incidents' (Howe, 1997, p. 238).⁶

To explicate the influences and dynamics of Applewhite's life, I draw from a wide variety of sources, including academic journals, texts and websites. Most telling of all are the many hours of video and audio tapes that Applewhite and Nettles recorded in the 1980s and 1990s. They discussed both the development of the group and their own beliefs.⁷

Applewhite's rejection of the body: sexuality and schizophrenia as factors

Applewhite's history unveils an adolescence and a young adulthood during which he internalised strict moral values. Furthermore, his passage into adulthood was fraught with sexual insecurity. As he approached middle age, he was hospitalised for what was likely his first full-blown schizophrenic episode.⁸

⁶ Howe (1997) explains why, in light of modern developments in psychology, the previously favoured psychoanalytic approach to understanding the individual is both dated and restrictive.⁵ It is dated because the approach does not acknowledge other psychological theories, including those that are empirically supported. It is restrictive because psychoanalytic theory dwells on the role of the unconscious, without understanding contemporary conceptualisations of the brain and cognitive processes (see Howe, 1997, p. 236).

⁷ In the years 1982–85, Applewhite and Nettles recorded approximately 150 hours of classroom sessions on audio tape. I have analysed approximately 35 hours of tape time. In the *Beyond Human – The Last Call* video series, recorded in the 1990s, Applewhite describes the beliefs of the group in an attempt to warn people of the impending apocalypse and to recruit new members. I have studied approximately 6 hours of videotape.

⁸ Schizophrenia usually emerges sometime from late adolescence to mid-thirties, but, the illness can emerge at any age (see American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 281). Applewhite was in his late thirties or early forties at the time of his hospitalisation, though less severe symptoms probably emerged earlier. Research consistently indicates that the appearance of the symptoms of schizophrenia is often a long, gradual process, although in some cases onset of the condition is rapid. For a detailed review of the literature, see P.J. McKenna (1994). McKenna also provides a good review of the debates that surround the specific origins of schizophrenia. He comments that even after decades of research, no conclusive evidence exists. Researchers have examined schizophrenia from psychodynamic approaches, biological approaches and a variety of other perspectives, including cerebral injury and neuropathological abnormalities. Although the specific aetiology of schizophrenia remains unknown, most researchers agree that the condition does not stem from psychological factors or from brain disease. Most evidence points to other biological and genetic origins (see McKenna, 1994, pp. 98–134).

Applewhite was born in 1932 to a modest family in Texas. His father was a Presbyterian minister, and Applewhite became actively involved in religious pursuits in early childhood (see R.W. Balch and Taylor, 2002, p. 210; Perkins and Jackson, 1997, p. 17). At the age of twenty he graduated with a Bachelor's degree in philosophy before enrolling at the United Theological Seminary of Virginia. He decided that he, too, would become a minister. In the same year, 1952, Applewhite married Anne Pearce and soon started a family. Over the next fifteen years his career took several turns. He joined the military, studied music at university, and then finally landed a teaching position at the University of Alabama. Applewhite was fired following accusations that he had had an affair with a male student. As a result of the allegations, he and his wife separated (see Perkins and Jackson, 1997, p. 17).

Following a move to Houston in 1965, Applewhite lived an openly gay life for at least a short period. From the mid to late 1960s, he had a fairly successful life in Houston, where he became a prominent member of the local music and arts scene (see Perkins and Jackson, 1997, p. 18). But his image was tarnished once again when rumours circulated that he was having an affair with a male student, this time at the University of St Thomas, where he taught. The failure of his heterosexual marriage, followed by a series of gay relationships, would soon be followed by his abstention from sex. Clearly, Applewhite had trouble coming to terms with his sexuality.

The early 1970s began with a period of hospitalisation for Applewhite, the official reason for which remains unclear. In an interview his sister claimed that he had had a heart condition. Others maintain that he had had a nervous breakdown. Still others suggest that he had overdosed on drugs (see Perkins and Jackson, 1997, p. 19). In 1972, shortly after his hospitalisation, Applewhite met Bonnie Lu Nettles. Little is known about her life except that she worked as a nurse and had a keen interest in the occult, astrology and Theosophy (see Balch, 1995, pp. 141–2).

Applewhite's encounter with Nettles was a major turning point. Nettles' impact on the then vulnerable and sexually confused Applewhite is key to the subsequent development of the group, as she was responsible for reinforcing his emerging delusional beliefs. When Applewhite confided that he had been having frightening visions and dreams, one of which had revealed him to be a Christ-like figure, Nettles prophesised his role on Earth. Furthermore, Nettles claimed that she had been in contact with extra-terrestrial beings, who had revealed to her that she would meet a person such as Applewhite (see R.W. Balch and Taylor, 2002, p. 210). The two became inseparable and sought to find an explanation for their relationship. In the year following, friends and family report that Applewhite suffered from a bout of mental illness. A friend of both Applewhite's and Nettles' wrote that they both suffered from mental problems. Applewhite himself claimed that he and Nettles communicated through voices in their heads (see Perkins and Jackson, 1997, p. 21).⁹

The interaction between Applewhite and Nettles at the early stage of their relationship clearly indicates psychopathology in Applewhite, most likely schizophrenia. The paranoid subtype of

⁹ Bonnie Lu Nettles remains an unsolved part of the Heaven's Gate puzzle. It is difficult to obtain a clear picture of her personal life and of her personality. Although her impact on Applewhite was tremendous, it is uncertain whether her communication through the 'voices in their heads' was something that she too perceived. It is possible that, given her keen interest in the paranormal and theosophy, she encouraged Applewhite's delusions and felt comfortable in her newly acquired role as his soul mate and guide.

schizophrenia is characterised by prominent auditory hallucinations, although other cognitive abilities such as speech and emotional expression may remain in tact. Applewhite's claim that he and Nettles communicated through voices in their heads typifies auditory delusions. His belief that he was the embodiment of Christ reveals the typical pattern of grandiose delusions symptomatic of paranoid schizophrenia (see American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 287).

Schizophrenia is generally defined by *positive symptoms*, which involve an 'excess or distortion of normal functions', and *negative symptoms*, which indicate a 'diminution or loss of normal functions'. Positive symptoms include 'disorganized speech' and 'disorganized behaviour' as well as delusions. Delusions are often paranoid, persecutory, grandiose and centred on *somatic* or *bodily* concerns. Moreover, delusions are sometimes religious in nature (see American Psychiatric Association, 1994, pp. 274–5). These kinds of delusions and others were to become prominent features of Applewhite's world.

Auditory hallucinations are a symptom of schizophrenia generally, but the paranoid subtype of schizophrenia is *characterised* by prominent auditory hallucinations, although other cognitive abilities such as speech and emotional expression may remain in tact (see American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 287). Applewhite was intelligent and often was very articulate and socially accomplished—attributes that no doubts were bolstered by his background in the performing arts. His claim that he and Nettles communicated via the voices in their heads is an example of such auditory delusions. Later, Applewhite claimed direct communication with extra-terrestrial or Next Level beings.¹⁰ Auditory hallucinations well explain his self-proclaimed contact with these creatures who told him how and why he should prepare his body for the Next Level.

Among the many and varied symptoms of schizophrenia, some of the most common and most apparent include disorganised thinking, cognitive slippage, loose associations and tangentiality (see American Psychiatric Association, 1994, pp. 276–7). Applewhite exhibited all of these symptoms during many of the taped classroom sessions. Often he lost track of what he was saying or started talking about something entirely unrelated to his previous articulation, making spurious connections among topics.

It is more difficult to assess whether Applewhite suffered from any of the negative symptoms that affect some persons with schizophrenia. Behaviours such as 'catatonic posturing,' 'affective flattening' and a decrease in communication with others (see American Psychiatric Association, 1994, pp. 276–7) are not evident in any of the audio or videotapes that I watched or heard. Of course, if he suffered from periods of negative symptoms, it is likely that he would not have engaged in tape-making activities in the first place. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) observes that for late onset cases 'The clinical presentation is more likely to include paranoid delusions and hallucinations, and *less likely to include disorganized and negative symptoms*' (American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 281 [italics added]).¹¹ Moreover, the DSM concludes that for the paranoid type that 'None of the following is prominent: disorganized

¹⁰ The Next Level was synonymous with Heaven, although progression to this place involved evolutionary progress. Applewhite named this place also T.E.L.A.H—The Evolutionary Level Above Human. Applewhite and Nettles used the terms 'Heaven,' 'Kingdom of Heaven' and 'Next Level' interchangeably.

¹¹ The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) also notes that women are more likely than men to become schizophrenic in later years.

speech, disorganized or catatonic behaviour, or flat or inappropriate affect' (American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 287).¹²

The developing belief system: bodily manifestations

Applewhite and Nettles attributed their meeting to divine intervention. Chapter 11 of the Book of Revelation became key to their belief that they had been 'chosen' for a special purpose. According to that book, two heavenly messengers will descend to Earth near the end of time, just prior to a two thousand-year period of darkness on Earth. Their purpose will be to gather human supporters who will follow them into the Kingdom of Heaven, where they will enjoy eternal life as androgynous entities. Applewhite and Nettles envisioned that their entrance into Heaven, or the 'Next Level,' would occur through a spaceship rather than on the cloud mentioned in the scripture (see R.W. Balch and Taylor, 2002, p. 211).

Applewhite and Nettles now had their mission set out before them, and central to the development of their belief were theories about what was required of humans to enter the Next Level. Initially, they proposed that to enter the Next Level one had to be in a living, physical body (see Balch and Taylor, 2002, p. 209). More important, each individual hoping to advance to the Next Level had to abstain from material, filial and sexual pleasures – belongings, family, friends, jobs and sex.

From the outset, Applewhite and Nettles ensured that the bodies of the group members reflected their differences from mainstream society. They believed that to evolve beyond the human level, group members had to discard all characteristics of humanity. Because bodies contribute to the construction and reflection of social meaning (see McGuire, 1990), the difference in appearance that the members achieved by adopting these measures helped them establish themselves as a group 'preparing to leave Earth'. Members' control of their bodies helped to establish the in-group/out-group dichotomy in which Heaven's Gate represented the saved and the outside world represented those under the influence of Lucifer. Moreover, as Radley (1996) states, people represent possible futures for their bodies by engaging in particular social interactions. Thus the members of Heaven's Gate reflected upon their future through the behaviours in their present.

The group adopted the name Human Individual Metamorphosis (H.I.M.), and Applewhite developed further ideas involving self-concept and the body. These ideas about bodily transformation are an expression of Applewhite's perceived loss of control over his own body. Typically, individuals with schizophrenia feel a loss of control over either their minds or their bodies (see American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 275). Applewhite's elaborate beliefs about bodily transformation are a direct result of his fixation with his own body. Moreover, P.J. McKenna (1994) notes extensive evidence of bodily hallucinations, and that these hallucinations usually pair with a detailed account explaining the bodily experiences (see McKenna, 1994, p. 9).

¹² While I discuss Applewhite's tangentiality in his conversation, he does not manifest the 'word salad' effect that disorganized speech reveals. Still, there may be some debate as to whether Applewhite conforms to the paranoid subtype.

Applewhite's elaborate but strange description of bodily transformation under alien influence is thus not an uncommon phenomenon.

Applewhite and Nettles maintained that Earth had been established as a garden where the Representatives had planted 'seeds of consciousness' that had been incarnated and reincarnated through human form. Christ had been sent to harvest individuals for Next Level entry but had found that the seeds had not fully ripened. Applewhite was to fulfil Christ's mission with Nettles as his guide (see [R.W. Balch and Taylor, 2002](#), p. 211). They advised members that human bodies were merely transitory vehicles to be discarded through a process of metamorphosis. Applewhite and Nettles stressed that this change was physical and was therefore dependent on abstinence from human indulgences. They used the butterfly as a metaphor for change: just as the caterpillar sheds its chrysalis and emerges transformed, so too would the followers of H.I.M. (see [Balch and Taylor, 1976](#), p. 61). Applewhite's plans were grandiose. He believed that he and his followers were the 'chosen few' and that they alone would go on to live eternally as superior, more evolved beings. The members of Heaven's Gate came to believe that they had a special purpose and that the spaceship would come to Earth to pick them up. Applewhite felt that he was following Christ's footsteps and that only he possessed the knowledge that could help save those on Earth who heard his message.

In 1976 the group stopped moving around, and members began renting houses where Applewhite and Nettles set up 'classrooms' to teach the 'students' their developing belief. With the establishment of residences, members now sought employment in order to help support the group. The group, however, kept contact with the outside world to a minimum. Applewhite and Nettles adopted the names Ti (Nettles) and Do (Applewhite) after the musical notes. They required that members of the group also abandon their human names in favour of a new one (see [R.W. Balch and Taylor, 1976](#), p. 66).¹³ Renaming one's self, and thus one's body, contributed to a change in the integral part of the social self that McGuire observes. Members who changed their names from their 'outside world name' to their Heaven's Gate names contributed to their changed perceptions of self.

Over the ensuing years the group moved several times, as some members left and others joined. What developed from this time in the mid-1970s was a regime designed to help maintain group cohesion. By establishing an intricate belief system and a highly regimented lifestyle, Applewhite and Nettles managed to create what would become a very dedicated group of followers. When the classroom teachings began in 1976, Applewhite and Nettles assumed complete control over the members' activities. The members, or 'crew', now lived in houses, or 'craft'. These terms further entrenched the idea that space travel was possible. Applewhite and Nettles established a power hierarchy in which the body was the 'subject and object of power relations' ([McGuire, 1990](#), p. 285). The body has long been the site of symbolic power. Inspired by Pierre Bourdieu, McGuire argues that although mainstream Western religion now has less explicit power in terms of social control of bodies, alternative religions are potent sites for the negotiation of bodily power relations and hierarchies (see [McGuire, 1990](#), pp. 2, 290).

¹³ Name changing often occurs as a means of establishing a new family unit to replace abandoned family attachments. Changing names helps to create group loyalty (see [S.H. Balch, 1985](#), p. 322). Nettles and Applewhite adopted many names over the years, including Guinea and Pig, 'The Two,' Bo and Peep, and Ti and Do.

Applewhite replaced the initial metaphor for change, the butterfly, sometime in the early 1980s. The new theory he proposed was that group members were not seeds planted on Earth but instead novice members of the Next Level. Members served apprenticeships on Earth before returning as fully fledged members of the Kingdom of Heaven (see Balch and Taylor, 2002, p. 217). This theory consolidated their ideas about the need to shed all human attributes, including the body, or ‘containers’. Moreover, Applewhite made further amendments to the group’s beliefs following Nettles’ death in 1985. Originally, the leaders had claimed that to move to the Next Level, one had to be alive. Now Applewhite assured the group that Nettles had returned successfully to the Next Level without a physical body. Still the plan was still to leave in a body and by spacecraft (see R.W. Balch and Taylor, 2002, p. 219).

The belief that the group members had originated from the Next Level served to strengthen the shared experience of the members that they were of the same physical nature as Representatives, and sought to liberate themselves from their human incarnation. This shared experience gives credence to the argument that ‘We experience things done to our bodies as things done to ourselves’ (McGuire, 1990, p. 284). For the members of Heaven’s Gate, bodily transformation entailed self-transformation. Thus the practices and experiences that they had adopted as humans were not representative of their true self-identities. The self-experience of each member as a ‘container’ rather than a functional human being resulted in a different experience from what most people consider typical human activities, such as eating, drinking, and sex. However, group members came to experience these commonplace activities as detrimental to their bodies and to their self-identities. Consequently, they had to eradicate or change these activities.

The social context is a central element of embodied experiences. In any given social setting we internalise values, norms and beliefs so that contextual expectations mediate our bodily experiences and our sense of setting. In this way, ‘Our bodies are manifestations of ourselves in our everyday worlds. At the same time, embodiment is our way of knowing those worlds and interacting with them’ (McGuire, 1990, p. 285). The members of Heaven’s Gate interacted with one another and behaved according to the values, norms and beliefs of their social setting. Their experiences reflected this context and their expectation.

Sexuality as sin and the body problem

From the outset, chastity had been a prerequisite of group membership. Given Applewhite’s struggle with his own sexuality, it seems likely that in order to control the sexual nature of his body, he decided that only total abstinence from sex would enable him to control his urges. His inability to accept his own sexuality may have occurred for a variety of reasons, but likely his strict religious upbringing might have played a key role. His confusion and disdain amplified with the onset of intense schizophrenic delusions.

The Presbyterian Church, like many other churches, has had a difficult time accepting the gay community and the idea of gay marriages. S.W. VanderStoep and C.W. Green (1988) conducted a study to investigate the relationship that exists between religiosity and intolerance of homosexuality. They report that research has established a strong positive correlation between people with high levels of religiosity and homophobia. Furthermore, due to the durability of beliefs of this nature, it is extremely difficult to change people’s views on homosexuality

(see VanderStoep and Green, 1988, pp. 145–6). It is highly probable that Marshall Applewhite's family regarded homosexuality as contrary to God's will. Consequently, at whatever point Applewhite understood his attraction to men, he would have tried to suppress it.

Although Applewhite did live an openly gay life for a period of time in Houston, perhaps guilt or fear of reprisals divine or otherwise plagued him until he concluded that the only solution was complete sexual abstinence. Despite Applewhite's misgiving about his sexuality, he later claimed that 'the gay world' represented a positive evolutionary advancement because it brought people closer to a world of no sex at all, perhaps because same sex unions do not result in reproduction (see Applewhite and Nettles, 1982d). When he met Nettles, there was no sexual desire on his part (see Perkins and Jackson, 1997, p. 20). Because of the lack of information on Nettles's background, it is difficult to understand her willingness to embrace chastity. What is certain is that together they developed an extremely complex set of beliefs that centred on the impingement of the body on the 'true' purpose of human beings. The many hours of audio and video that are Applewhite's and Nettles's legacy are a testament to that belief.

The audio and videotapes reveal explicitly Applewhite's believe that humans were tempted to adopt sexual relationships because of the nature of their bodies. He stated that our human bodies are 'vehicles'¹⁴ to be discarded like items of clothing. When we enter the Next Level, we evolve into different physical beings – creatures that do not have the trappings of human bodies (see Applewhite, 1992a).

Delusions that centred on his body plagued Applewhite. He believed that gender change was possible, and he often commented on how he needed to control his body and make it ready for physical transformation. Applewhite steadfastly advocated the need to free ourselves from our bodily 'addictions'. Although he mentioned problematic behaviours such as over-eating, drinking and smoking, he placed most emphasis on sexual relationships. By calling these behaviours 'addictions,' he pathologized them. To Applewhite, nearly all human endeavours were problems to be overcome. In the same breath he classified both martini drinking and family attachments as things that we are 'hooked' on (see Applewhite, 1992a). According to Applewhite, the body that we reside in is the key hindrance to our progress, and he argued that it exists as a continual source of temptation. He claimed that the body has its own sets of impulses separate from our true self. He equated the body to being 'like a kind of living computer that never quite shuts down' (see Applewhite, 1992c).

Applewhite attributed the seductive nature of the body to Lucifer's influence. Following Lucifer's fall from God's Kingdom, according to Applewhite, he made it his goal to continually put temptation in our path. In fact, Lucifer or ('Luci', as Applewhite usually referred to him) is the main protagonist in human downfall. During many discussions Applewhite warned his followers that Lucifer was always 'trying to get them'. A.E. Schefflen (1981) comments that schizophrenics often explain personal experience by identifying the root of the problem:

He [the schizophrenic] thinks like a classic Aristotelian, believing that some concrete entity, some person or thing, is the cause of it all, and imaging unseen forces that govern his

¹⁴ In both the video and audio recordings, and on the Heaven's Gate website, Applewhite referred to the human body as either a 'vehicle' or a 'container'. Applewhite appeared to prefer 'vehicle' and often corrected himself during classroom sessions if he used the term 'body' to describe the human form. I use 'body' and 'vehicle' interchangeably.

experience. In the paranoid instance, he ‘discovers’ who his enemy is, and he comes to ‘know’ just what forces or influences are being used against him. (Schefflen, 1981, p. 94)

For Applewhite, Lucifer was the known enemy and the body and sexuality were some of the means by which his integrity was compromised.

Applewhite argued that the worst possible outcome of temptation is not just sexual intimacy itself but love. Love, he said, is a concept created by Lucifer to tempt us to engage in sexual activity, and sex itself is a drug to which we are addicted. He went as far as to argue that we are ‘possessed’ by our sexuality; accordingly, as long as we engage in sexual activity, we cannot see clearly, and therefore, are not yet ready to enter the Next Level (see Applewhite, 1992c). Again, Applewhite clearly demonstrated a common symptom of schizophrenia—delusions of a sexual nature. McKenna (1994) reports that sexual delusions are manifested in a variety of ways, one of them being a belief ‘that one’s sex is changing’ (McKenna, 1994, p. 4). In accordance with Applewhite’s feelings regarding sex, he designed the sleeping quarters to prevent sexual excitement. Men and women slept separately at all times and slept fully covered by their bedclothes (R.M. Balch and Taylor, 2002, p. 215).

These beliefs clearly underscore Applewhite’s justifications of celibacy for group members. While sexual abstinence as a core group tenet is evidential of Applewhite’s own dysfunctional beliefs about sex and the body, another avenue of exploration exists. As leaders of a group, Applewhite and Nettles used strategies to maintain group cohesion. Leaders sometimes use celibacy, for example, as a means of control in group settings (see Qirko, 2002, p. 322). Often the leaders manipulate celibacy by encouraging group members to adopt a similar physical appearance. When we live with people who look physically similar to us, we identify these people as family members and we avoid sexual behaviour with them (see Qirko, 2002, p. 323). According to Stephen Balch, this process of biological ‘mimicry’ encourages members to redirect the types of feelings reserved for actual family members to the group instead (see S.H. Balch, 1985, p. 325). Individuals mimic implicit kin cues in a number of ways. First, the group leaders keep members in close contact with one another in a manner characteristic of family units. Second, group members look and sound alike by adopting similar hairstyles, clothing, symbols, speech patterns and gestures. Lastly, members break all ties with their natural family unit (see Qirko, 2002, pp. 323–4).

According to this perspective, two key benefits exist for groups that establish celibacy. Celibate members do not establish the kind of relationships that result in marriage and families. As a result, they do not direct time and energy toward their own family unit. Instead, members direct resources inwardly to the group. Second, celibate members typically will turn their financial resources over to the group because they have no biological dependents (Qirko, 2002, p. 323). Additionally, families generally afford access to alternative social contacts who may have beliefs and norms running counter to those of the group (see S.H. Balch, 1985, p. 316). Consequently, by creating a new family, one that was largely self-contained, Applewhite and Nettles succeeded in preventing the type of relationships (sexual) that might have threatened group cohesion. To counter the threat of extra-group relationships, they established the group as the centre of each member’s life, in effect establishing new and more important relationships for each member. The group as family is a frequent phenomenon Lewis Coser wrote in his analysis of utopian communities ‘one can find in most of them the witting or unwitting exaltation of the community as the one true family’ (Coser, 1974, p. 143).

This model of celibacy is applicable to the members of Heaven's Gate. Applewhite and Nettles established a family-style living environment when the group began renting houses in which members lived together. The members' androgynous appearance strengthened the family unit. The members of Heaven's Gate looked alike—so much so in fact—that upon discovery of their bodies following their mass suicide in 1997, the police initially identified all the members as male (see Claiborne, 1997, p. A1). The group believed that life in the Kingdom of Heaven is genderless, and that Representatives of the Next Level are androgynous beings. Preparations for this type of existence, therefore, had to begin on Earth. Several years after Nettles's death, Applewhite claimed that she had 'overcome' her female form before passing on (see Applewhite, 1992b). The body of each adherent symbolized each member's understanding of his or her role on Earth, and as such reflected the social meaning that each member had internalised. The members of Heaven's Gate shaped their bodies to symbolize their future purpose, that of Next Level Representatives.

Applewhite's inability to accept his attraction to men meant that he chose sexual abstinence for himself, and dictated it for others. Whether he anticipated the benefits of increased group strength and cohesion at the outset is not certain, but surely he must have recognized the effect with time. Chastity and celibacy require discipline and self-denial, but, for those who left the group, a return to a full sex life was an option. Castration is, however, a permanent commitment. The autopsy reports of the suicide victims show that eight of the members had been physically castrated, including Marshall Applewhite (see Perkins and Jackson, 1997, pp. 5, 91). Apparently, Applewhite did not consider celibacy a robust enough deterrent against sexual temptation for some members. Indeed, Applewhite maintained that while there are still hormones circulating within one's body, temptation would continue to be a problem (Applewhite, 1992c). Applewhite's dysfunctional beliefs about the nature of sexuality coupled with his interpretation of biblical scripture had turned the body into an object of ruin. For him it had become the enemy and it had to be defeated.

By recognizing that people 'know' their world through their bodies, we can better understand the different realities that exist for different people (see McGuire, 1990, p. 286). In Applewhite's case, schizophrenic delusions altered his concept of body, and his reality reflected this distortion. It is impossible to do a retrospective analysis of all the group members, but Balch's (1980, 1995) and Lalich's (2004) theories on commitment in the group provide likely answers to questions of membership and loyalty, as does my aforementioned discussion on the creation of a new family unit. Furthermore, Davis argues that members accepted Applewhite's reality through a process of religious obedience (see Davis, 2000). The group, therefore, readily accepted Applewhite's philosophy of sexuality and other dimensions of bodily experience.

Radley (1996) pointed to the embodied experience as representative of our social situation (see Radley, 1996, p. 561). The denial of sexuality (and of other human attributes) within the social world of Heaven's Gate represented the battle for transformation, the yearning for what possibilities (see Radley, 1996, p. 559) might lie in the future; pointing to what Radley identified as 'transcendence on the one hand, immediacy on the other' (see Radley, 1996, p. 564). In this way, corporeal *realities* and *opportunities* fused for Applewhite's followers. Along similar lines, McGuire, reminds us that different parts of the body can contribute to how we view our self identity and its link to our social reality (see McGuire, 1990, p. 288). The denial of the sexual body involved a denial of the sexual self. The members believed that their bodies were not meant to be

sexual. By abstaining from sexual activity, the members redefined their bodies in yet another way that represented their denial of humanness. For the members of Heaven's Gate, their social reality was one that required, nor allowed, sexual bodies.

The strange case of 'Brother David'

While celibacy is a requirement for Representatives of some traditional religions, notably for priests in the Roman Catholic Church, castration is not. Indeed, the Catholic Church is completely opposed to castration as a signifier of religious devotion (see Roberts et al., 1997, p. 418).¹⁵ For some members of Heaven's Gate, castration symbolised loyalty to the group. In 1995 a member of Heaven's Gate's approached a private urology clinic seeking an orchiectomy (castration). His doctor referred him for psychiatric evaluation to determine his eligibility. The member gave his psychiatrist permission to publish his case, feeling that others might benefit from his experience. Roberts and her colleagues (1997) report that Brother David's, as the patient identified himself, desire for castration stemmed from his belief that his sexuality interfered with his faith. He did not identify himself as a member of Heaven's Gate but instead said that he was a monk with the 'Ascension Monastery'. Brother David referred to his body as a 'tool' and said that his testicles were 'obsolete'. Feelings of guilt and shame also haunted him. Like Applewhite, Brother David had lived an openly gay life during his young adulthood but had begun to question his sexuality when in his mid-twenties. He had then met two monks who introduced him to their religion. Of course, the 'monks' were members of Heaven's Gate, and Applewhite and Nettles had taught Brother David to see his body as a 'tool' and as a vehicle.

Following extensive psychiatric evaluation of Brother David at the clinic, the attending psychiatrist concluded that his request for the procedure, though unusual, was not based on any evident psychosis or known psychiatric disorder. Still, Brother David's urologist declined to carry out the operation (see Roberts et al., 1997, pp. 415–20). While the man who presented himself as Brother David may have developed problems coming to terms with his own sexuality even without Heaven's Gate, the group surely magnified his difficulties. Applewhite insisted that only when people are free from their sexual desires can they enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Furthermore, his discussion on the 'problem' of hormones seems an allusion to the necessity of castration (see Applewhite, 1992c).

Just as celibacy is an instrument of controls, so is castration. Stephen Balch (1985) describes the history of the use of both as means of securing loyalty. The purpose of these methods of control has been to rid the person of family connections and to ensure that the person does not have access to beliefs at odds with those of the group. He also notes that the group creates a substitute family environment in order to strengthen this severance (see S.H. Balch, 1985, p. 316).

¹⁵ Historical accounts reveal, however, that castration has emerged on occasion as a symbol of holy devotion. Some pagan priests, for example, avoided sexual temptation by castrating themselves (see Ranke-Heinemann, 1990, p. 99). Prior to the sixteenth century, Christian churches castrated some young boys in preparation for their roles as bureaucrats, servants and singers (see Wiesner-Hanks, 2000, p. 44). The seventeenth century Russian Christian sect, the Skoptsy, engaged in castration as a means of salvation (see Englestein, 1999, pp. 17–18).

More body work—the regimented body

Although Applewhite and Nettles placed much emphasis on the sexual nature of the human body, from the early days of the group's development they also formed other ideas about the body. These ideas resulted in additional rules governing treatment of the body. From the outset, one of the key beliefs of the group was that members would shed their human bodies and evolve into Next Level beings. The preparations for the Next Level took many forms. At times, Applewhite and Nettles regulated what the group members could eat and drink, when they could sleep, what they could discuss, and where they could work.

In 1976 Applewhite and Nettles initiated a practice named 'Central,' one reintroduced periodically over the years. They designed 'Central' not only to prepare members for life aboard the spacecraft that was to allegedly transport them to the Kingdom of Heaven but also to help rid members of their humanness. For this reason many members embraced the procedure (see R.W. Balch and Taylor, 2002, pp. 215–6). It also functioned, however, as a gruelling control mechanism over each person's body as it involved strict regimentation. Members had to turn up at a specific location in the house every 11 min throughout the day and then had to ask themselves how they could better serve the group. This kind of extreme self-regulation was recurrent. 'Central' created bodily experience on both the individual and the group level. Each member was privy to knowledge that he or she was preparing for an exploration into space. This knowledge set each individual apart from other members of society while binding each individual more closely with other members of the group.

Balch (1995) discusses several of the other numerous measures that Applewhite and Nettles instituted to help to control members and their bodies. For example, 'A tone' kept human thought processes at bay: 'Members would put a vibrating tuning fork against their temples and concentrate on the note it produced, learning to focus on the sound while eating, washing cars, doing laundry, and taking care of other chores' (R.W. Balch, 1995, p. 155). A procedure called 'eyes' involved members observing one other's behaviours to ensure that each person was conforming to the group's newly established norms (see R.W. Balch, 1995, p. 158). Later, members monitored one other's behaviours by being assigned a 'check partner.' Partners were responsible for ensuring faithful adherence to group doctrine and were required to expose those members guilty of infractions (see Applewhite and Nettles, 1984c). Applewhite and Nettles instituted these practices purportedly to help the members overcome their human forms, but at the core each activity heightened intra-group control through beliefs and behaviours that originated in Applewhite's own somatic issues.

The behaviours that the members engaged in echo Radley's (1996) discussion of the 'reordering of cultural artefacts' (see Radley, 1996, p. 565). The bodies of the members of Heaven's Gate existed not only as subjects for possible change and transcendence but also within a setting in which they renegotiated everyday activities and objects. The behaviours that the group members engaged in were 'expressive displays' that convey of a self-contained world in which the body's meaning and symbolism are reconceptualised (see Radley, 1996, pp. 565–6). As Applewhite's followers prepared for their future, they renegotiated their present.

Weak bodies are human bodies

While many of the behaviours adopted to help overcome the humanness of the body were based on specific tasks and commands, others were more subtle, but just as effective at convincing group

members that bodily transformation was not only desirable but also attainable. Many of Applewhite's classroom lectures discussed methods by which individuals could monitor their own bodies. Applewhite advised members to meditate at least three times daily in order to facilitate this process of body reflection. Applewhite declared joyfully that 'Ti and I would be happy if we could do it [meditate] at least twenty three and a half hours per day' (Applewhite and Nettles, 1982a).

While meditating, group members had to dispel all negative thoughts, which were deemed responsible for cellular decay. Vehicular decay, Applewhite asserted, caused the body to push the mind away. He believed that by attaining a healthy body by Next Level standards, all decay would vanish and the mind and body would become one. Applewhite and Nettles taught members that they already had Next Level minds and that problems arose because of the incompatibility between their advanced minds and their human bodies (see Applewhite and Nettles, 1984a, 1984b). Any sign of sickness, of human 'weakness', creates conflict that prevents Next Level progress. Do told students that they need to 'wipe out that old nasty humanness' (Applewhite and Nettles, 1982b).

Applewhite's recommendations for vehicular maintenance are understandable in light of his fixation with his body. Schefflen (1981) identified that common to schizophrenics 'is a pre-occupation with self-evaluations, including past failures, reviews of self and bodily image, and dreams of imaginary or wished-for accomplishments.' (Schefflen, 1981, p. 94). Applewhite's need for control of his body and the accompanying hallucinations he experienced reveal this continual self-review process. He instructed members to think of themselves, not as humans but as Next Level Representatives (see Applewhite and Nettles, 1982c). Applewhite's dream of accomplishment was the transformation of the group from human beings burdened with unwieldy bodies to ideal entities free from somatic concerns.

Looking for signs

Though many of the group's rules had become more relaxed by the mid-1990s, the group itself became more insular. In 1995 the members moved to a remote area of New Mexico where they began building 'earth ships' erected from earth and tires. But the venture was a failure for many of the members who did not want to live in such uncomfortable conditions. Their all-too-human bodies were aging. In fact, Do's health was starting to fail, and more often he believed that the time had come to exit the planet. Only when the group came to accept that the time to journey to the Next Level was approaching did they adopt the name Heaven's Gate (see R.W. Balch and Taylor, 2002, pp. 219–21).

The group also began thinking of new ways to move on to Heaven. Since Nettles' death, the group believed that they did not require either a physical body or a spaceship. Death as a mode of transport became an option, and the group began considering suicide. From the group's perspective, death was removal from the body—only the vehicle remains—while the true self would move on to the Next Level. When, in 1997, the Hale-Bopp Comet became headline news, Do became convinced that Ti was returning to Earth in a spaceship concealed in its tail. Though Do failed to observe the spaceship with a telescope, he still believed that Hale-Bopp was the sign that he had been waiting for (see Anon., 1997, p. 31). The members prepared for what they called their 'final exit' (see R.W. Balch and Taylor, 2002, pp. 221–4).

Conclusion

Marshall Applewhite and Bonnie Lu Nettles created a belief system in which they identified the body as separate from the self. They considered the body not only an encumbrance but also the symbol of wickedness and immorality. Members of Heaven's Gate fought a daily battle with their bodies, and their experiences of self came to be extremely dysfunctional. Despite over twenty-five years without the occurrence of say bodily transformation, Applewhite continued to believe that change was possible. The group just had to work harder.

The body of each member existed as part of a social world that in turn shaped each member's notions of selfhood. As a physical substance, each member also experienced a wide range of environmental stimuli, which created a unique experience for each member. Both the bodily self-expression of each adherent and the relations that existed between leaders and followers reflected that experience. Members of Heaven's Gate created their own social environment in which they operated according to their own rules. At the same time Applewhite and Nettles allowed little contact with the outside world. As a result the bodies of the members reflected the meanings established within their own microcosm. As Radley comments, '[the body] ... is always there in people's attempts to forge new groups or to leave old ones, and it is a key medium in both cases' (Radley, 1991, p. 128). The adoption of similar physical appearances indicated their 'family' status. Applewhite and Nettles assumed the parental roles, and members became their children.

When listening to the audio tapes, I often found myself thinking that Applewhite and Nettles sounded like genuinely concerned parents wanting only the best for their children. Indeed, Balch and Taylor observed that Applewhite and Nettles encouraged members who wanted to leave to do so and gave those who departed their blessings (see R.W. Balch and Taylor, 2002, p. 216). This streamlining process served to strengthen the group by keeping only those prepared to make the commitment. From those who remained, Applewhite and Nettles required a full commitment. They made it clear that their beliefs were the only true ones and that there was no room for doubt. They considered other religions misguided and under the control of Satan, no matter how well intentioned they appeared. Applewhite and Nettles were likeable people, and I feel compassion for them. But, for all their seemingly well-meaning statements, at the heart of the Heaven's Gate belief system existed two very troubled individuals who shaped a faith that culminated in the death of thirty-nine persons.

The manifestation of Applewhite's schizophrenic symptoms in his already troubled psyche created a vast delusional landscape in which he situated himself and his followers. I have shown how the complex nature of schizophrenia allows for the fabrication of an elaborate belief system in which protagonists are certain that they know the 'truth'. By the time of the suicides in 1997, thirty-eight other persons believed it, too. Despite this compelling evidence that the psychology of a powerful individual can influence the actions of a group, some researchers argue that this relationship is unlikely to occur. According to Gordon Melton and David Bromley, 'Attributing organizational outcomes to the personality of a single individual, even a powerful charismatic leader, usually camouflages much more complex social dynamics' (Melton and Bromley, 2002, p. 47). While I do not consider that a simple cause-and-effect relationship exists between an individual's personality and group behaviour, in at least some instances the psychological makeup of the leader is a powerful variable in group dynamics (see Kent, 2004). Undeniably, other factors contribute to group behaviour. But these factors operate in conjunction with the leader's

personality. The psychobiographical profile of Applewhite, coupled with the social environment in which the group existed, exemplifies this interaction.

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