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1997

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Fifth Estate #349, Summer 1997

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

The Culture is a Cult

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The recent mass suicide by 39 members of the Heaven’s Gate group created a fabulous media feeding frenzy of apocalyptic proportions. An occurrence as certifiably weird as this could not be confined to the check-out-counter tabloids: it was top-of-the-hour evening news wacky, cover of *Time* and *Newsweek* creepy. At the height of our virtual age, not even the scribes of comic books, pulp fiction and B-movies could cook up a scenario this fantastic.

Like a high-tech tragic tribal happening, Heaven’s Gate provides talk-show caliber new age science fiction psychodrama that puts the old-school incense and chants of Hare Krishna to shame. But as the professional journalists and armchair pundits of mainstream America cast judgments and jokes towards that California mansion, or to the Internet, or to that comet in the sky, we must remember the peculiar nature of the culture in which Heaven’s Gate and many other so-called cults emerge.

We live in the culture of cults. We are the weird. America, land of the fringe and home of the brash. David Duke. David Koresh. Tim McVeigh. Jack Kevorkian. The Freeman. Hell’s Angels. The Ku Klux Klan. Charles Manson. Richard Nixon. O. J. Simpson. Jeffrey Dahmer. Compared to real murderers

and messianic politicians like Hitler, Stalin and every United States president, Heaven's Gate leader "Do" Applewhite and his followers are rather harmless: lightweight androgynous neo-Christian cyber-geeks conducting a love-in with some cosmic light in the sky. Suicide is not murder, and when considered in the social context of postindustrial media culture at the end of the millennium, Heaven's Gate fits right in.

Whether people worship at church or the shopping mall, various legions in our ranks hold sacred illusions and pay homage to questionable idols like Television, War, 12-Step Programs, Drugs, Money and Work. On a continent that once was an island of magic and wilderness, we now live in a lifeless landscape dominated by concrete, metal and plastic. America abounds with chemical and social pollution. Consumer capitalism is the biggest cult of all.

History teems with messianic political leaders who lead men to die in war. Soldiers in one nation-state and their enemies in another die to serve the cult of patriotism, the devotion to flag and country acts as a drug as noxious as any phenobarbital pudding with a vodka chaser (the recipe which facilitated the Heaven's Gate demise). How many people die to serve the cult of the automobile, the cult of the airplane, the cult of nuclear power, the cult of agent orange, the cult of the cigarette, the cult of alcohol, the cult of work, the cult of bigotry and ignorance?

In this alienated and fragmented culture, as devoid of meaning as it is filled with data, is it any wonder that people seek genuine community in so-called "fringe" groups? Some of us who call ourselves anarchists and anti-authoritarians can fall prey to a vapid media voyeurism similar to the speculations about the "victims" of Heaven's Gate. The New Age has its "Do" Applewhite. Anarchists have their Unabomber.

One suicidal spiritual science fiction cult may seem simultaneously more odd and benign than the everyday cult of American culture at the end of the century: a religion of obedience

more pervasive, dangerous and resilient than any freak on the fringe. Let the sci-fi faithful beam up to their spaceships. Let the religious zealots rapture. Our task is not to condemn or condone the deceased members of Heaven's Gate, but to ask tough questions about the quality of our own lives and the presence or absence of meaning, passion, and community in them.

It may take the destruction of industrial capitalism and modern civilization to realize the true potential of the human community, but we cannot wait for that day to cultivate a sense of family in our fragile radical milieu. Death to the culture of cults! Long live the experimental community of voluntary association, wilderness expansion and convivial anarchy.