

# Are millennial movements obsessed with death? The Branch Davidians and Heaven's Gate

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“Aum Shinrikyo in Japan, the Branch Davidians in Texas, Heaven's Gate in California, the nonreligious Manson Family — all had faithful disciples. All embraced death.” This fragment appeared in an article by Clyde Haberman in the *New York Times* about how an understanding of Doomsday Cults can offer useful insight into ISIS today.<sup>1</sup> It is this language and these types of generalizations that equate millennial movements with terrorism. Due to unfortunate incidents and misunderstandings, millennial movements are often depicted by media as groups of violent, indoctrinating outcasts that refuse to partake in society.<sup>2</sup> This essay considers the relation between millennial cults and death, and whether millennial groups may be said to be obsessed with death. The symbolic power of death has been described by Mircea Eliade (1959; 1968) and Maurice Bloch (1992) as an expression of a longing for the end of a certain way of life. Bloch connects millennialism and potentially violent or terrorist actions by emphasizing the role that (symbolic) violence plays in the critical socio-political aspect to millennial beliefs.<sup>3</sup> Eliade, in stark contrast to most scholars on millennialism, considers millennialism to be a normal phenomenon, a logical expression of human nature.<sup>4</sup> His theory was developed further by Robert A. Segal (1978) and Daniel L. Pals (1996) in their discussions of Eliade's work. Two millennial movements, the Branch Davidians and Heaven's Gate, as well as their violent ends are examined in detail to determine the extent to which Eliade and Bloch's theories apply to them. The Branch Davidians were a millennial movement led by David Koresh that was situated in a compound in Waco. After being besieged by the U.S. government in 1994, Koresh and his followers perished when their communal building caught fire.<sup>5</sup> The second case study, Heaven's Gate, was founded by Marshall Herff Applewhite and Bonnie Lu Nettles in the U.S. in the 1970s.<sup>6</sup> Around forty of its members died in a mass suicide in a house in Santa Fe, California, in

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<sup>1</sup> Clyde Haberman, “What Doomsday Cults Can Teach Us About ISIS Today,” *New York Times*, updated 5 November 2017.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance: Andrew Marshall, “It gassed the Tokyo subway, microwaved its enemies and tortured its members. So why is the Aum cult thriving?” *Guardian*, updated 15 July 1999; Neal Baker, “Pure Evil: Inside Australia's notorious cult ‘The Family’ whose woman leader ‘collected’ dozens of children and injected them with LSD as she prepared for apocalyptic war,” *Sun*, updated 14 February 2017; Jonathan Kaiman, “McDonald's murder in China: ‘evil cult members’ face trial for woman's death,” *Guardian*, updated 18 August 2014;

Leon Aron, “Kingdom Come: Millenarianism's Deadly Allure, from Lenin to ISIS,” by Leon Aron, the *New York Review of Books*, updated 13 February 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Maurice Bloch and Alfred Harris, *Prey into Hunter: The Politics of Religious Experience* (Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> Robert A. Segal, “Eliade's theory of millenarianism,” *Religious Studies* 14, no. 2 (1978): 159.

<sup>5</sup> Todd Kerstetter, “That's just the American way: the Branch Davidian tragedy and Western religious history,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (2004): 465 doi:10.2307/25443054.

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin E. Zeller, “Extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutics and the making of Heaven's Gate,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 14, no. 2 (2010): 39, doi:10.1525/nr.2010.14.2.34.

March 1977.<sup>7</sup> An understanding of the ways in which millennial movements operate can assist academics as well as professionals in their approach towards millennial movements that seem to be headed for violence against themselves or others. Preventing miscommunication is key when it comes to peaceful interaction between insiders and outsiders of millennial movements.

### **An obsession with Death**

The commonly accepted description of millennialism is the idea that the world as it is known will end and life will be radically changed for the better within this lifetime.<sup>8</sup> Millennial groups, especially those that expect the end of the world to occur imminently, encourage their members to actively contribute and transform the world, and are often guided by a messianic figure.<sup>9</sup> The connection between millennialism and death is not completely without grounds, as millennial groups have traditionally viewed death and killing as some form of a test of faith that could lead to deliverance from evil.<sup>10</sup> An interesting account of the connection between millennialism and (symbolic) death was offered by Maurice Bloch in his *Prey into Hunter: The Politics of Religious Experience* in 1991, with a foreword by Alfred Harris. Bloch shows how the display of religious rituals can serve as a political statement by forming a parallel between the Merina of Madagascar and the early Christians led by Saint Paul, the Apostle of Christ.<sup>11</sup> In the late 19th century, the Merina expressed their discontent with the present king Ramada II by exhibiting only the first part of an originally tribal circumcision ritual, and by refusing to display the second. Symbolically, they expressed only their conquest by death, but refused to in turn conquer death and be able to return to normal life under the rule of the king.<sup>12</sup> The signal of this symbolic ‘welcoming of death’ was amplified by the fact that the Merina left their crops, fields, and families: they were refusing to partake in activities necessary for the continuation of human life.<sup>13</sup> A similar refusal of reproduction was expressed by the early Christians led by Saint Paul. The millennial nature of this group expressed itself in Paul’s disinterest in the circumcision of new converts, as life on earth (including reproduction) would soon be changed for the better.<sup>14</sup> In a similar way, the Merina and the early Christians displayed and refused to display certain symbolic rituals, and thereby expressed a refusal to continue living in the present world. According to Bloch, then, millennial religion welcomes symbolic death as a way to escape an unsatisfactory human world and enter into the perfect and eternal kingdom of God. In this context, the emergence of millennialism beliefs and movements is a form of criticism against present circumstances. There exists a certain ambivalence or doubt in millennialism, between on the one hand the desire to distance oneself completely from society to reach another, purer realm, and on the other hand the desire to actively engage in society to thereby transform it into a purer reality.<sup>15</sup> Every ritual that serves to represent and re-establish life therefore has a ‘millenarian

<sup>7</sup> Winston Davis, “Heaven’s Gate: a study of religious obedience,” in *Heaven’s Gate: Postmodernity and Popular Culture in a Suicide Group*, ed. George D. Chryssides (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011), 421.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Allen Landes, *Heaven on Earth: The Varieties of the Millennial Experience* (New York: OUP USA, 2011), 18-22; Segal, “Eliade’s theory of millenarianism,” 169.

<sup>9</sup> Landes, *Heaven on Earth*, 18-22;

<sup>10</sup> Landes, 463;

Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (London: Pimlico, 2004), 21-22.

<sup>11</sup> Bloch and Harris, *Prey into Hunter*, 86.

<sup>12</sup> Bloch and Harris, 87-89.

<sup>13</sup> Bloch and Harris, 87-89.

<sup>14</sup> Bloch and Harris, 91-93.

<sup>15</sup> Bloch and Harris, 94-95.

possibility:’ any type of ritual that includes a temporary distancing from mundane, earthly life, could potentially be used to express the desire for a permanent distancing from life as it is known.<sup>16</sup>

In contrast to Bloch, who, like most scholars on millennialism, considers it an extraordinary phenomenon, Mircea Eliade held the more exceptional position that millennialism is a natural result of human’s discomfort with history. Daniel L. Pals (1996) and Robert A. Segal (1978) offer clarifying analyses of Eliade’s writings. In *Cosmos and History: The Myth of Eternal Return* (1959), Eliade describes how all humans need to find a way to tolerate the ‘terror of history’: the gripping thought that, perhaps, there has been no meaning behind most of the incredible suffering that innocent people have had to endure at different stages in time, and it was all simply arbitrary and incidental.<sup>17</sup> At the start of human history, all people shared the worldview of what Eliade calls the ‘archaic man.’ Once these people recognize the arbitrariness of their position within the world, they are overcome by a feeling of distance from the primordial, sacred realm to which they truly belong.<sup>18</sup> The world of the archaic man is divided by a duality between sacred and profane: all that is related to mundane, every-day activities is profane, whereas the sacred is special, spiritual, and eternal.<sup>19</sup> By focusing on rituals and activities that represent the sacred realm, archaic people seek to escape historical time and to find meaning in sacred, meta-historical time. For instance, by participating in harvest rituals, archaic man not only connects to human sexuality and birth, and the seasons and regeneration of nature, but also to the original, mythical act of fertility that created the world.<sup>20</sup> In addition to archaic man, Eliade identifies ‘historical man,’ who holds a worldview that was introduced first with the emergence of the Judeo-Christian monotheism, and again a couple of centuries ago. Historical man considers the present day part of the story of history: every historical event, be it a war or an invention, appears when it does due to the unique and necessary course that history has taken, and it is in this course that meaning should be found.<sup>21</sup> The worldview of historical man preserves the idea that each individual person has the freedom and creativity to be a part of an unprecedented historical event by making themselves a historical agent.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, according to Eliade, this freedom and this creativity are not enough. Historical man seems unable to tolerate history without giving it at least some additional meaning in the form of a God or Universal Spirit that enables faith.<sup>23</sup>

As a result of secularization and the lack of an alternative for the Universal Spirit that can give meaning to history, historical people have started to experience a discomfort. This is why, in contrast to many scholars, Eliade considers millennial religion a logical phenomenon: he views it as the solution of historical man’s discomfort by a return to a more archaic view of history.<sup>24</sup> During his lifetime, archaic man is unable to fully escape historical time, but rather tolerates it. Upon death, he is finally able to be completely free from history and instead inhabits sacred time.<sup>25</sup> In a similar way, millennial movements focus on a return to the divine realm. In the case of Christian millennialism, for instance, this would be the return

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<sup>16</sup> Bloch and Harris, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959), 150-152.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 168.

<sup>19</sup> Pals, 164-165.

<sup>20</sup> Segal, “Eliade’s theory of millenarianism,” 159.

<sup>21</sup> Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion*, 148; 181-182.

<sup>22</sup> Pals, xi; 161-162;

<sup>23</sup> Pals, 159-161; 185.

<sup>24</sup> Segal, “Eliade’s theory of millenarianism,” 159-162.

<sup>25</sup> Segal, “Eliade’s theory of millenarianism,” 159-162.

to the paradise that man lived in before the Fall. In Eliade's theoretical framework, the connection between millennialism and death thus lies in the fact that ultimately, earthly human life is the epitome of the profane realm, and the tie to it. By severing this tie – symbolically or physically – man can forever exist in the eternal and primordial realm. Together, the theories of Bloch and Eliade posit the existence of two realms: one divine and undying, and the other earthly and temporary. A refusal to exist in the earthly realm, expressed by sole engagement in 'divine activities,' and possibly by the display of (symbolic) death, serves as a protest against historical time. This protest could have a number of reasons, ranging from local socio-political protest to a disenchantment with humanity and a frustrated quest for meaning.

### **The Branch Davidians under David Koresh**

The Branch Davidians were the result of a fraction within the Davidians, who in turn had separated from the Seventh-Day Adventist movement.<sup>26</sup> The Branch Davidians settled in Waco, Texas and created an isolated community named Mount Carmel. David Koresh, who became the leader of the movement in 1955, was specifically concerned with the parts of the Book of Revelation in the Bible that referred to God holding seven seals that could start the apocalypse, which could only be opened by the 'Lamb.'<sup>27</sup> Koresh viewed himself as 'anointed,' tasked with causing the fall of Babylon (i.e. the U.S.) and the revelation of the seals to true believers.<sup>28</sup> Like their Seventh-Day Adventist predecessors, the Branch Davidians focused on the correct interpretation of the Book of Revelation, emphasizing themes such as a necessary sacrifice as a proof of faith, and being tested by external influences.<sup>29</sup> The movement expected an imminent and violent end of the world and believed the U.S. government to play an important role in it. This end was envisioned as the earth being swept by a cleansing fire, which would destroy all the wicked but merely test true believers, after which God's reign on earth would commence.<sup>30</sup> Koresh thus expected himself and his community to be attacked and opposed in a big event during which God would hear the community's prayers and would come to their rescue, bringing with him an all-encompassing fire.<sup>31</sup>

In the 1990s, the Branch Davidians gained media attention in the U.S. for a number of reasons. In June 1991, there was a custody struggle over one of the children in Mount Carmel, inspired by Koresh' engagement in sexual activities with under-aged girls. Although the custody case was handled peacefully in 1992, opponents of the Branch Davidians were convinced that the cult was planning a mass suicide or homicide, and gained an increasing amount of media attention.<sup>32</sup> As a result of these rumours, the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) started to investigate the movement throughout 1992 and 1993. In January 1993, after the ATF found evidence indicating the illegal manufacturing of weapons at Mount Carmel, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) decided upon the strategy of a 'dynamic entry' to arrest and interrogate Koresh and the

<sup>26</sup> Kerstetter, "That's just the American way," 455.

<sup>27</sup> Kerstetter, 455-456; Kenneth G. C. Newport, *The Branch Davidians of Waco: The History and Beliefs of an Apocalyptic Sect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 172.

<sup>28</sup> Newport, *The Branch Davidians of Waco*, 224; Eugene V. Gallagher, "The persistence of the millennium: Branch Davidian expectations of the end after 'Waco'," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 3, no. 2 (2000): 303, doi:10.1525/nr.2000.3.2.303.

<sup>29</sup> John R. Hall, "Mass suicide and the Branch Davidians," in *Cults, Religion, and Violence*, edited by David G. Bromley and J. Gordon Melton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 152.

<sup>30</sup> Hall, "Mass suicide and the Branch Davidians," 308.

<sup>31</sup> Hall, 218-219.

<sup>32</sup> Hall, "Mass suicide and the Branch Davidians," 156-157.

Branch Davidians. This strategy was meant to be an intimidating, but harmless sudden entering of the compound, using the element of surprise to ensure that members were nowhere near the stashed weaponry. The FBI lost this element of surprise, but the entry still took place, and a forty-minute gunfight followed. Subsequently, Mount Carmel was besieged for fifty-one days.<sup>33</sup> Eventually, the FBI tried to induce the Branch Davidians to flee the building by using tear gas.<sup>34</sup> However, due to reasons that are still debated, the building caught fire, killing the majority of the Branch Davidians including Koresh and leaving 'Waco' to become a striking example of a millennial movement that ended in mass violence.<sup>35</sup> Although it is still uncertain what caused the fire to erupt, there is evidence indicating that the Branch Davidians may not have tried to escape.<sup>36</sup>

The debate about the causes of the Waco fire suggests that the Branch Davidians had at least some reason to commit collective suicide. In one of his works figuring the archaic man, Eliade mentions the Christian tendency to link a cleansing fire with the process of re-entering paradise and being transported into another time.<sup>37</sup> Koresh' teachings on the attack of the community by an outside force, most likely the U.S. government, and the ensuing fire as rained down by God over all the wicked on the earth, liberating the Branch Davidians, seem to line up precisely with what ultimately happened on April 19, 1993. As discussed earlier, members of millennial movements view the world in a dualistic way, and thus interpret it differently than modern, historical man would. The investigations, the slander resulting from them, and eventually the attempt to break into the compound may have all been interpreted ahistorically and in biblical terms. In this way, Koresh and his followers would have recognized in their own circumstances the biblical final battle to be fought to prevail over evil, after which a state of paradise could be entered again. The communication between Koresh and FBI agents during the siege became increasingly frustrated as Koresh would respond to concrete questions and proposals by the agents with religious speeches about the seven seals and the Book of Revelation.<sup>38</sup> Although the FBI agents were not able to connect these words to the siege, Koresh may have been describing exactly what he was experiencing.<sup>39</sup> As the siege grew longer, the FBI employed more aggressive techniques in the hope of convincing the Branch Davidians to leave, such as shining bright spotlights on the compound throughout the night to disturb their sleep and to wire them out psychologically.<sup>40</sup> In Koresh' millennial and Christian interpretation, the aggressive strategies employed by the U.S. government were simply trials that true believers had to undergo and actively fight in order to prove their faith to God. If this interpretation was prevalent during the start of the siege, it is bound to have increased in intensity as the FBI's strategies became more invasive. If, after fifty-one days, Koresh and his followers held fast to their Christian divine interpretation of the suffering that they had been going through, it is likely that the final occurrence of gas-induced fire would have been interpreted not as a historical, phenomenal fire, but as a spiritual, divine fire. As seen before, the Branch Davidians welcomed such a cleansing fire, and may have embraced it physically as well as symbolically.

The open attitude towards death that the Branch Davidians may have ultimately had does not necessarily mean that they were planning to cause their death through some sort of self-inflicted or outward violence. Although many were shocked to hear what was happening

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<sup>33</sup> Kerstetter, "That's just the American way," 456-458.

<sup>34</sup> Kerstetter, 461.

<sup>35</sup> Kerstetter, 465.

<sup>36</sup> Newport, *The Branch Davidians of Waco*, 285.

<sup>37</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries: The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Reality*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Collins, 1968), 67.

<sup>38</sup> Kerstetter, "That's just the American way," 459.

<sup>39</sup> Kerstetter, 461.

<sup>40</sup> Kerstetter, "That's just the American way," 460.

inside the compound during the siege, nearby shop owners and neighbours had never been bothered by the Branch Davidians before.<sup>41</sup> The Branch Davidians focused their life around biblical texts and their interpretation as offered by Koresh, and had little contact with non-members, leading a tavern owner to describe them as a 'religious commune, not a cult.'<sup>42</sup> Rather than actively changing the world in which they lived, the Branch Davidians under Koresh isolated themselves from mainstream society, to a place where they would be left alone. This isolation from society and a focus on divine activities was a way in which these archaic people could come closer to the primordial realm that they longed to be in. Although there was a discourse of battle and possible death present in the doctrine of the Branch Davidians at Mount Carmel, the movement did not seem to be working towards that goal actively.<sup>43</sup> They did actively attempt to escape historical time, by living in accordance with the rules and customs of an earlier, mythical, time (i.e. biblical time), and by refusing to make 'new' history in mainstream society. However, the Branch Davidians in Waco did not solely engage in divine activities: Koresh made a profit by illegally manufacturing and selling weapons.<sup>44</sup> He believed himself entitled to all sexually mature women in the community, and fathered children with many.<sup>45</sup> Although they were certainly working towards a confrontation, the Branch Davidians did not show the reluctance to engage in reproduction that would be characteristic of a cult obsessed with death.

The Branch Davidians seemed to have employed an ahistorical interpretation with regard to their actions in an area where a historical interpretation prevailed. This difference between worldviews resulted in miscommunication and misunderstanding, as becomes apparent from the frustrations during the siege. The ahistorical framework that the Branch Davidians employed includes earthly death as part of a shift to the divine realm, and thus death was in some way connected to the Branch Davidians. Nevertheless, it is important to note that according to Koresh's teachings, the Branch Davidians would not die spiritually in the imminent cleansing fire. Rather, all unbelievers and sinners would die, and true believers would be spared.

### Heaven's Gate

Heaven's Gate is best defined as a mixture of Christian and New Age ideas.<sup>46</sup> The movement emerged in the U.S. at a time when people were resisting the mainstream culture of traditional Christianity and capitalism.<sup>47</sup> This New Age counterculture was characterized by an increased individualization and spiritualization of religion which replaced the conventional focus on written authorities and communities. Simultaneously, this was the time when space travel was emerging as a major field of interest and extra-terrestrial life was starting to be considered seriously by the scientific community.<sup>48</sup> Both of these tendencies were represented in Heaven's Gate. The movement was founded in the 1970s by Bonnie Lu Nettles and Marshall Herff Applewhite, later known as 'Bo' and 'Peep.'<sup>49</sup> Heaven's Gate employed an 'extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutics,' by which it interpreted the Bible as referring to otherworldly life-forms in a further level of evolution, who were prepared to

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<sup>41</sup> Kerstetter, 462-463.

<sup>42</sup> Kerstetter, 462-463

<sup>43</sup> Kerstetter, 457.

<sup>44</sup> Kerstetter, 456-458.

<sup>45</sup> Newport, *The Branch Davidians of Waco*, 201.

<sup>46</sup> Zeller, "Extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutics and the making of Heaven's Gate," 54.

<sup>47</sup> George D. Chryssides, "Approaching Heaven's Gate," in *Heaven's Gate: Postmodernity and Popular Culture in a Suicide Group*, ed. George D. Chryssides (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011), 3.

<sup>48</sup> Chryssides, 3-4.

<sup>49</sup> Zeller, "Extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutics and the making of Heaven's Gate," 40.

return to earth in order to help humans transform themselves so that they could ultimately be transported to heaven in spaceships.<sup>50</sup> The role that Applewhite and Nettles saw for themselves in this process was that of the Two Witnesses as described in the Book of Revelation.<sup>51</sup> Applewhite and Nettles interpreted the Bible with a focus on the materiality and tangibility of biblical forces and spirits, and believed that members could transform themselves biologically and chemically by getting detached from their human condition. They expected eternal life to be independent from the earthly limitations of sustenance, sexual reproduction, and death. The movement attracted its greatest following on the West Coast, with the amount of members peaking around two hundred.<sup>52</sup> These followers were not all young, as was often the case in New Age Movements, but substituted a general demographic representation of the American population, also including people with tertiary education.<sup>53</sup> Throughout time, the leaders became stricter in their expectations from members and by the 1980s, the movement was down to about half of its initial members.<sup>54</sup> Ultimately, Heaven's Gate had some forty members in 1997, when the group committed collective suicide.<sup>55</sup>

Interestingly, the Heaven's Gate suicide contradicted the earliest teachings of Applewhite and Nettles: as they interpreted the Bible materially and literally, humans were supposed to transform themselves into other beings *while alive*.<sup>56</sup> However, in a 1975 flier, Applewhite and Nettles wrote that if a someone was murdered for his membership of Heaven's Gate, he or she could still enter the Next Level, the superior part of space from where Jesus was expected come to the earth to liberate his followers.<sup>57</sup> The shift towards suicide is fundamentally connected to Nettles' unexpected death of cancer in 1985. After Applewhite explained to the group that Nettles had to leave her 'vehicle' because it could no longer contain her energy, the human body and its life were no longer deemed necessary for salvation by spaceships. In the following years, Heaven's Gate experienced multiple failures in the form of a lack of responses to proselyting efforts, as well as the ridiculing of Applewhite and his followers by popular media, and finally Applewhite's own decreasing health.<sup>58</sup> Presumably, the group could not find a suitable way to fit into society, and began to think of ways to leave it by leaving their human vessels behind. Around 1994, concrete plans concerning suicide were being discussed, including a plan to provoke the government authorities in the hopes of being killed, as seemed to have happened in Waco. In late 1996, Heaven's Gate members were making concrete steps towards the end of life on this planet: they sold their possessions and started to combine their Away Team uniforms, that would show that they were the group of new members of the Next Level that were chosen to return to the kingdom of God.<sup>59</sup> To Applewhite, the arrival of the Hale-Bopp comet, and the rumours of the spaceship that it was supposed to be hiding, were signs that the moment had come for the Heaven's Gate members to be picked up by spaceships.<sup>60</sup> Since Applewhite had become convinced that the spaceships would not land upon earth, as this would violate the

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<sup>50</sup> Zeller, 41.

<sup>51</sup> Zeller, 47.

<sup>52</sup> Zeller, 40-44.

<sup>53</sup> Chryssides, "Approaching Heaven's Gate," 12.

<sup>54</sup> Zeller, "Extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutics and the making of Heaven's Gate," 41.

<sup>55</sup> Chryssides, "Approaching Heaven's Gate," 18.

<sup>56</sup> Robert W. Balch and David Taylor, "Making sense of the Heaven's Gate suicides," in *Cults, Religion, and Violence*, ed. David G. Bromley and J. Gordon Melton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 209.

<sup>57</sup> Balch and Taylor, 213; Zeller, "Extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutics and the making of Heaven's Gate," 44.

<sup>58</sup> Balch and Taylor, "Making sense of the Heaven's Gate suicides," 217.

<sup>59</sup> Balch and Taylor, 217.

<sup>60</sup> Balch and Taylor, 219-222.

'biblical mandate that the elect would meet Christ mid-air', members had to shed all their human attachments in order to enter.<sup>61</sup> In March 1997, Applewhite and thirty-eight members of Heaven's Gate ingested a mixture of phenobarbitals, vodka, and applesauce so they could ascend towards the heavens and live in the kingdom of God.<sup>62</sup>

Before the members of Heaven's Gate started to consider suicide, they were already focused on letting go of everything that bound them to their human existence, such as sexual urges and the consumption of alcohol, drugs, or cigarettes.<sup>63</sup> These things were abandoned because they were related to everyday life on earth and distracted individuals from their intellectual, as well as physical transformation.<sup>64</sup> In light of Bloch's theory regarding the symbolic power of death, this lack of consumption shows an individual refusal to continue to engage with the world as it is known. Many U.S. citizens in this period were questioning traditional authorities and became increasingly occupied with self-reflection and self-development, and this applied to Heaven's Gate members as well. The movement was centred around the objective of becoming the most pure, enlightened version of oneself, so that one would be among the chosen few that were given the privilege of leaving this earth for a superior place.<sup>65</sup> Inherent to this aim is a criticism of the world as being too impure, corrupt, and in need of complete transformation. Next to their refusal to individually engage with the world, Heaven's Gate members stopped investing in artistic interests such as music and drawing.<sup>66</sup> The combination of ceased sexual activity and creative activities expresses a refusal to engage in the production of new life and beauty in the world.<sup>67</sup> This refusal is in a way already connected with death, as it signifies that the way of life on earth as it is known will not continue.

Although Applewhite and Nettles were gentle leaders compared to those of other millennial movements – for instance, compared to Koresh –, they did expect high motivation and growth from their members. In a number of cases, they urged members to leave, when these did not achieve as much progress as the rest of the group did through practice and contemplation.<sup>68</sup> The living conditions of members were made to be similar to the living conditions aboard the spaceship that they would enter when Christ came.<sup>69</sup> This spaceship was a place of pure spirituality, and to prepare themselves members had to obey strict rules regarding daily life activities, from using the toilet, wearing uniforms, sleeping in a way that prevented sexual arousal, to putting butter on bread.<sup>70</sup> The strict rules prevented members from worrying about the past or the future, and urged them instead to focus on the present.<sup>71</sup> Thoughts about the past and the future are historically oriented thoughts, whereas according to Eliade's theoretical framework, being in the now has the potential to open people up to experiencing a moment of the sacred, an extraordinary sensation of being mesmerized by a completely different reality.<sup>72</sup> It was this experience that the members of Heaven's Gate were searching for.<sup>73</sup> In addition to this, Applewhite and Nettles implemented an exercise in

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<sup>61</sup> Zeller, "Extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutics and the making of Heaven's Gate," 54.

<sup>62</sup> Davis, "Heaven's Gate: a study of religious obedience," 421.

<sup>63</sup> Zeller, "Extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutics and the making of Heaven's Gate," 44.

<sup>64</sup> Zeller, 44.

<sup>65</sup> Zeller, "Extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutics and the making of Heaven's Gate," 44.

<sup>66</sup> Zeller, 44.

<sup>67</sup> Bloch and Harris, *Prey into Hunter*, 94-95.

<sup>68</sup> Balch and Taylor, "Making sense of the Heaven's Gate suicides," 216.

<sup>69</sup> Balch and Taylor, 215.

<sup>70</sup> Balch and Taylor, 215.

<sup>71</sup> Balch and Taylor, 215.

<sup>72</sup> Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion*, 164-165.

<sup>73</sup> Balch and Taylor, "Making sense of the Heaven's Gate suicides," 216.

reflection that served to highlight how members had inadvertently slipped back into their human habits, and to help members let go of them again.<sup>74</sup> Heaven's Gate members thus constantly registered and corrected each other in order to abandon human habits such as doodling and singing to collectively remain in the super-human realm on which they could come into contact with Christ. Although Heaven's Gate had no violent intentions, in a way its members were already trying to terminate their life in the earthly realm.

The eventual decision by Heaven's Gate members to commit collective suicide seems to have been the result of members' growing frustration with their inability to leave historical time while alive. The long awaited appearance of Christ failed to occur, members faced continued ridicule by outsiders, and had to live via strict rules. Partly as a result of Nettles' death, Heaven's Gate seems to have come to the conclusion that the only way to let go of all things human was by ending human life. In this context, it is interesting that Applewhite engaged in increased proselyting in the 1990s.<sup>75</sup> Although Heaven's Gate was trying to counter sexual urges – with some even men going as far as castration – and halted creative activities, this increasing proselyting would seem to be representing the reproduction that is typical of those choosing to continue earthly life.<sup>76</sup> However, this attempt may also be interpreted as a final attempt to enable as many people as possible to be liberated by Christ. When the increased attempts at conversion failed, Applewhite interpreted this failure as a sign of Christ's arrival being near.<sup>77</sup> Presumably, Applewhite argued that if Christ's coming was imminent, it would not be possible to enlighten any new members in time, which is why they did not present themselves.

Heaven's Gate was not a violent millennial movement from the start, and even emphasized the importance of transformation in a living body. However, a number of external circumstances such as Nettles' death, and the repeatedly delayed arrival of Christ, led to uncertainty with regard to the strategy that the movement should employ. The goal of Heaven's Gate members was to free themselves from life as they knew it, and they were highly motivated to do this in any way possible. When members started to consider the shedding of their human body as an alternative strategy, they had already fundamentally changed the way they viewed the world, their bodies, and their lives. To the members of Heaven's Gate, suicide may have merely been the physical expression of the decision to leave earthly life, a decision they had already made much earlier.

## **Conclusion**

The violent incidents that have occurred in connection to millennial movements inspired an examination of the extent to which an obsession with death could be a characteristic of millennial religion. Both the Branch Davidians and Heaven's Gate movements indisputably have a connection to death as a way to leave all things earthly and profane and to enter a divine and pure realm. However, these movements are not necessarily obsessed with death, nor with actively ending their own or others' lives by means of violence. Important here is the distinction between a 'normal' account of death as the end of human life and the functioning of the human body, and a more spiritual death, which can serve as a new beginning of life in another world. Both case studies considered in this essay employed an ahistorical worldview, which led them to give more importance to the latter meaning of death than the former. Although both groups displayed a relatively open attitude towards spiritual death, the decision to collectively end lives (and it is not entirely certain that this decision

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<sup>74</sup> Balch and Taylor, 216.

<sup>75</sup> Balch and Taylor, 220; Zeller, "Extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutics and the making of Heaven's Gate," 41.

<sup>76</sup> Balch and Taylor, "Making sense of the Heaven's Gate suicides," 220; Zeller, "Extraterrestrial biblical hermeneutics and the making of Heaven's Gate," 41.

<sup>77</sup> Balch and Taylor, "Making sense of the Heaven's Gate suicides," 221.

was made by both groups) was influenced by external factors. The Branch Davidians started out with a life that was isolated, biblically oriented, and – although deviating from mainstream Western morals and law – peaceful. Despite the discussion of impending battle and illegal trade in weapons by the Branch Davidians, there was no direct indication that they were preparing to fight a battle *on earth*. During the siege, Koresh consistently employed an ahistorical biblical interpretation, which could have led members to view the fire as the way to be saved by God. A main objective of the Heaven’s Gate movement was to end life as it was known, and to become so spiritually pure that a new life in a heavenly place was possible. Nettles’ death and Applewhite’s interpretation of this death merely offered the new option of a physical death as a last step to becoming spiritually free. If there was an obsession present in these groups, it was never with death, but with (re)gaining spiritual and religious purity, and entering into a more perfect way of life. These millennial movements viewed the world in ahistorical, archaic terms, whereas their surroundings viewed the world historically. Due to these different worldviews and ignorance from both sides, outsiders ended up provoking and ridiculing the millennial movements, whereas the members themselves came across as obsessed with death and as a danger to society. Understanding the worldview and behaviour of millennial movements is not just interesting for scholarly debate, but also valuable for the interaction between – and safety of – members of millennial movement and outsiders.

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