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## Book Review

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CHRYSSIDES, George D. (ed.). 2011. *Heaven's Gate: Postmodernity and Popular Culture in a Suicide Group*. Farnham: Ashgate New Religions. xi + 215pp. ISBN 978 0 7546 6374 4. Hbk. £47.50.

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On an early spring morning in 1997 I was rushed to the public service TV studio to explain why a religious group of which I had never heard had committed collective suicide. My modest approach in trying to explain apocalyptic belief and collective suicide from what we so far had learned from Peoples Temple, Branch Davidians and the Solar Temple was not what the reporter in the studio wanted to hear. She constantly returned to the concept of brainwashing, believing that this was somehow the best explanation. In the public discourse not much has changed since then. But without going into the debate about brainwashing, there is far more to learn from Heaven's Gate than recruiting techniques or why members stay on in deviant groups.

James R. Lewis identifies Heaven's Gate as one of "the big five" – a group that demands explanation when teaching religion in a university class. But at the same time it is a group on which little academic work has been done. At last, as with the Solar Temple, there is now a book that collects academic research concerning Heaven's Gate.

The book consists of an introduction to the book, eight academic articles and the 88 update by Applewhite himself. The collection of articles consists of six previously published, one adaptation of a master's thesis from 1998 and one completely new.

Of course, a book consisting of articles on Heaven's Gate must include some work by Robert W. Balch and here we find the classic article "Seekers and Saucers: The Role of the Cultic Milieu in Joining a UFO Cult" (co-written with David Taylor) which is an early study of the group in its days of formation. It is fascinating reading about the hardship and struggle the group went through in trying to form a consistent group. For anyone interested in the problematic theories concerning the recruiting of members and brainwashing this is a must.

The short article by Mark W. Muesse "Religious Studies and 'Heaven's Gate': Making the Strange Familiar and the Familiar Strange" from 1997 is more reflections on what has happened, a plea for not jumping to irrational conclusions about religion and the need for further study of the unfamiliar.

Patricia L. Goerman's study "Heaven's Gate: The Dawning of a New Religious Movement" is longer and focuses on the sociological theories about the formation of new religious groups and their recruitment. She holds that sociologists are much better equipped than the media in understanding these events, which may be obvious for scholars who study religion, but nonetheless a statement that deserves to be repeated in a world where almost all discussion on cults takes place in the media.

Winston Davis' "Heaven's Gate: A Study of Religious Obedience" focuses on a familiar

theme: how best can we understand the group's decision to commit collective suicide? Davis point out the obvious, that brainwashing theories lack explanatory power. Instead he suggests that we must look for theories of religious obedience – a new and potentially more productive way of looking at such groups.

Hugh B. Urban's, "The Devil at Heaven's Gate: Rethinking the Study of Religion in the Age of Cyberspace" and Douglas E. Cowan's "'A Sometimes Mysterious Place': Heaven's Gate and the Manufactured Crisis of the Internet" exemplify new problems that Heaven's Gate has posed for scholars of religion. Urban focuses on Enlightenment rationality and suggests that we must see beyond this to a post-Enlightenment hermeneutic approach. Cowan focuses on the moral panic concerning cults and recruitment on the Internet and correctly concludes that the Web has a very small part in explaining the Heaven's Gate incident.

The two most interesting articles appear at the end of the volume. Benjamin Ethan Zeller's "Scaling Heaven's Gate: Individualism and Salvation in a New Religious Movement" and George D. Chryssides' "'Come on up, and I will show thee': Heaven's Gate as a Postmodern Group." Both examine the worldview of Heaven's Gate, which is a most exciting world of innovation and originality. Zeller analyses the road to salvation by looking at the development and change throughout the history of the group, connecting this to the concept of "American religion," which makes perfect sense. Chryssides puts Heaven's Gate in a post-modern perspective, connecting this with a study of its worldview – a most welcome perspective with a focus that all too often is forgotten.

When it comes to studies on Heaven's Gate there is a strong tendency to explain why the members of the group could reach the decision to commit suicide. While this is a reasonable question, the tedious debunking of media's brainwashing claims becomes tiresome, and omits what is really interesting: the faith, beliefs and worldview of Heaven's Gate.

This collection of articles is essential reading on Heaven's Gate and no one who hopes to understand this group should be without it.