Attitudes Toward the Tragic:
a not-so-horribly-biased approach to the Heaven's Gate e-mail campaign

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In the February twenty-first 1998 edition of the *San Diego Union*, a back-page headline reads: "Ex-Heaven's Gate follower kills self on 2nd Try"(Thorton 1998). This is how I first got the news: in a clipping my mother sent me from San Diego. That was just a few weeks ago.

I had exchanged quite a bit of e-mail with Ric—the man who killed himself. He was the last follower of Marshal Applewhite at the time of the 1997 suicides—the forty-first to enter Heaven's Gate. Applewhite and his small band of web site building multi-dimensional New Agers committed ritual suicide in order to pass through where physical bodies cannot go. In so doing, they joined their spiritual superiors in the next stage of being.

This is what Ric believed the result of his suicide would be. But for all I had I talked to him, he sounded like a more or less reasonable guy. Still, he chose to take his own life. It's this sense of total-self-negation-made-reasonable that goes to the heart of why the Heaven's Gate group's motives and choices still haunt me.

To get to the topic of my article, however, we have to step back in time a bit and imagine it's the twenty-sixth of September, 1995. You are looking at an Internet news-group you often check to keep up with current events—"alt.current-events.usa," and you see something like this:
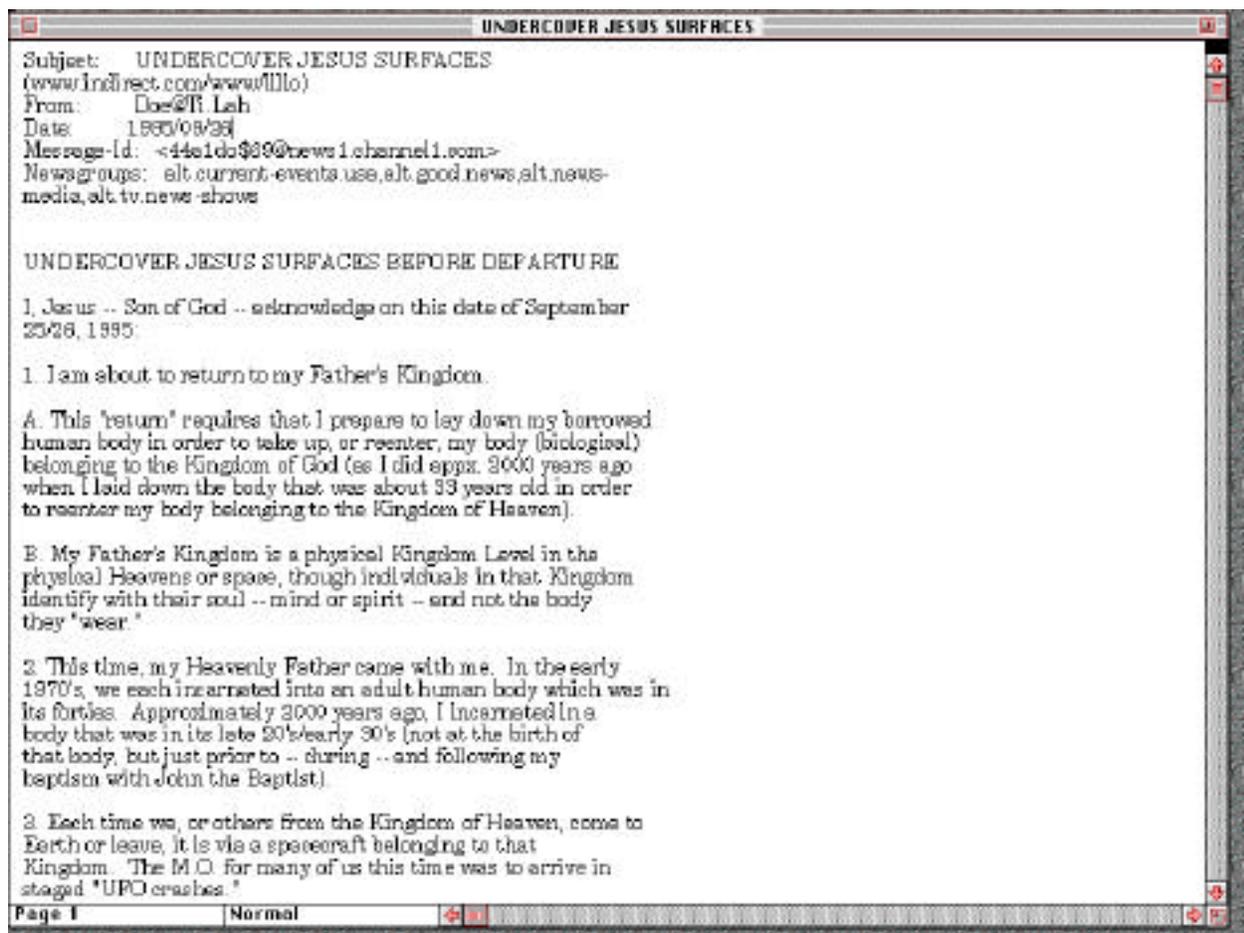
Figure 1

A news-group is an electronic bulletin board that individuals can access on the Internet. There are thousands of newsgroups, and each focuses on a single topic. Through e-mail, anyone can post pretty much whatever they want in these public forums. What you see here is a representation of the "alt.current-events.usa" newsgroup. Each of these titles represents a single post that someone put up here. In a few days they will disappear from the list as new posts keep coming in—but if it were September 1995, you could look the article just below the "45" in

figure one, and see, "UNDERCOVER JESUS REVEALED." If you did see this, you might

have clicked on it, chosen to read it, just because it is such a strange sounding title. Already,

maybe, smirking at its incongruity. The posted article would have looked similar to figure two.
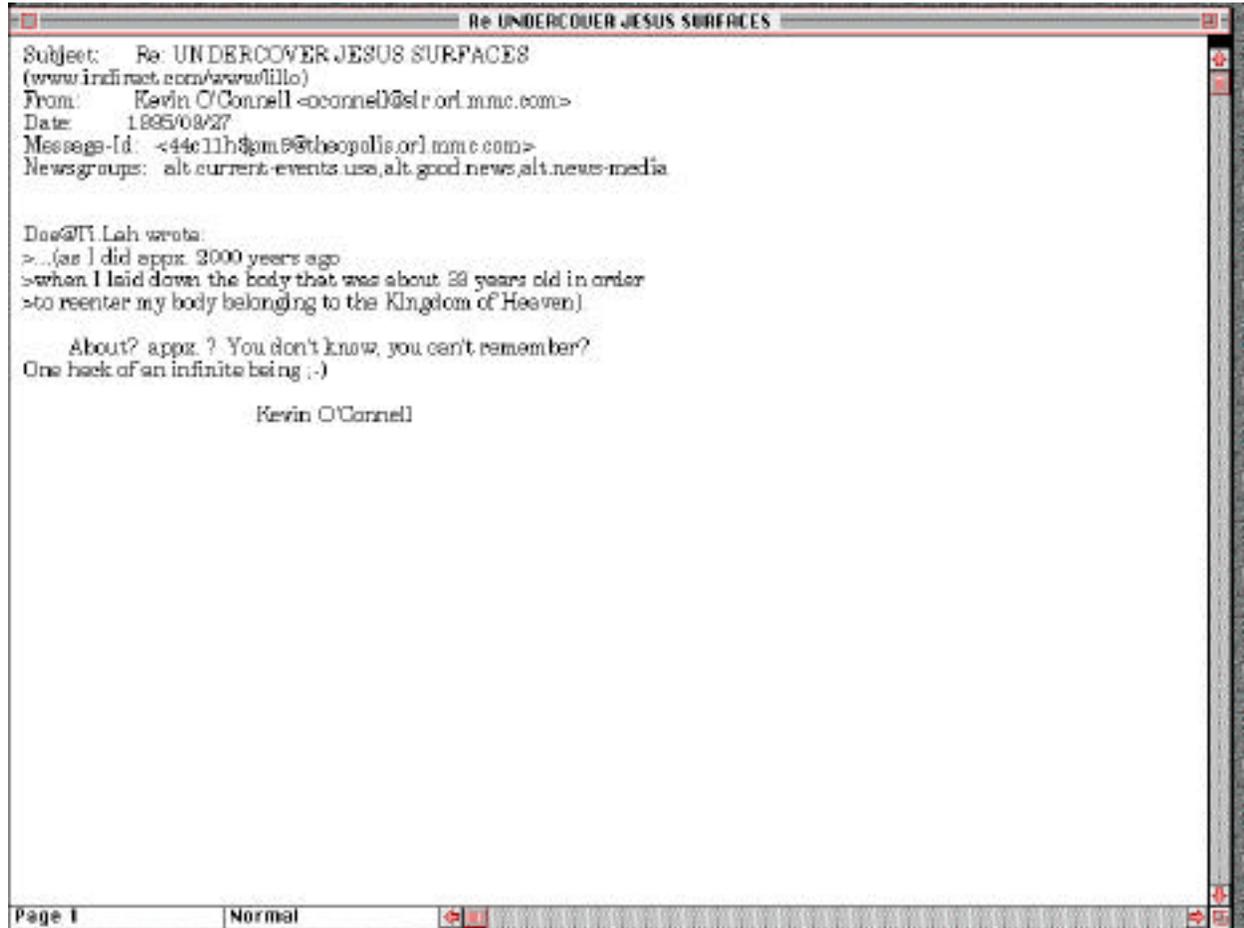
Figure 2

What attitude might you take toward this odd statement? Might it be a little derisive?

Might it be something like you see in figure three?

Figure 3

Figure 3 — Screenshot of a newsgroup message window titled "Re UNDERCOVER JESUS SURFACES" containing the following text:

Subject: Re: UNDERCOVER JESUS SURFACES
(www.indirect.com/www/lillo)
From: Kevin O'Connell <oconnell@slr.orl.mmc.com>
Date: 1995/08/27
Message-Id: <44c11h$pm9@theopolis.orl.mmc.com>
Newsgroups: alt.current-events.usa,alt.good.news,alt.news-media

Doe@T1.Lah wrote:
>...(as I did appx. 2000 years ago
>when I laid down the body that was about 33 years old in order
>to reenter my body belonging to the Kingdom of Heaven)

    About? appx.? You don't know, you can't remember?
One heck of an infinite being ;-)

                Kevin O'Connell

Even as scholars and interested parties in all forms of religious belief—even we might have smiled as this man did.[1] We might have thought, "Ahh, another nut-case on the Internet—how common they are becoming!" If we did, we would hardly have been alone.

The man I presume wrote, or at least approved, the "UNDERCOVER JESUS" post saw our responses to it as indicative of a failure of language. On his now infamous web site, he notes how "it is nearly impossible to take advanced, non-human concepts and force them into comprehensible human language." After two tentative newsgroup posts and the creation of a

web page, Do, the spiritual leader of the Heaven's Gate group, came to realize, "after posting

them for only a few days" that "we [should] take these statements off the Internet. It was clear

to us that their being introduced to the public at that time was premature." When Do and his

group posted, they faced, not surprisingly, a large amount of social recalcitrance.

In newsgroup communication, a post, if successful, provokes response posts, and then

responses to response posts, and so on. Normal Internet discourse on public newsgroups is

differentiated from many other mediums by its extremely debate-centered communicative norms.

As I have argued elsewhere, the Internet, and its purely verbal forums in particular, would not

exist if people did not want to communicate. [2] It is nothing more than communicative exchanges

surrounding specific topics. It has its own norms and its own social pressures. One of these

most obvious pressures is that of open and engaged responses. Successful communication on the

Internet demands that the communicators be ready and willing to engage each other in debate. In

almost all Heaven's Gate newsgroup posts I have been able to find, this Internet norm is

completely disregarded.

If we had noticed their post in 1995, and still remembered it in the Spring of 1997, our

attitude probably changed. Faced with the onslaught of media attention to the Heaven's Gate

mass suicide these messages from the group take on a more dangerous tone. They become

cautionary—a reminder of what many have dubbed a "tragedy."

The main-stream media, while grappling with this tragedy, seemed hard pressed not to

snicker and dismiss. On Easter Sunday in 1997, ABC hastily organized a news program to air

the outpouring of horror associated with the discovery of 39 rotting corpses in a beautiful

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[1]   As a folklorist and ethnographer, I generally operate with Emile Durkheim's premise that all religions are true in, at least, the sense that they function for the individuals who adhere to their doctrines. For a folkloristic approach to contemporary millennial thought, see Wojcik (1997).

suburban home. In particular, they were deeply concerned with the role the Internet played in this cyber-conscious religious group. A middle-aged blond woman chairing a panel of business-suited media experts stated: "Coming up next: ABC's technology correspondent Gina Smith will show how cults use the Internet to recruit members. And what, if any, regulations there should be"(*This Week* 1997).

On another channel, Dan Rather stated that Heaven's Gate doctrines were easily found on, "the darker side of the [World-Wide-]Web"(*48 Hours* 1997).

As freely accessible information, the Heaven's Gate group's ideas seem as if some dangerous substance lying un-watched out in the dark alleys of the electronic community—a case of loaded guns, explosives, or, maybe even, barbiturates and plastic bags.

It seems to me, there is something brutally focusing about mass self negation. There is something hard to dismiss about 39 individuals taking barbiturates, alcohol, and calmly helping each other to hold plastic bags over their heads until they are dead. There is something rather attention grabbing about purple cloth draped over dangling tennis shoes. The television made the Heaven's Gate group's beliefs brutally real in their tragedy. However, my article will attempt to problematize our immediate responses. Yes these people were out of the ordinary, but yes they were also very ordinary.

I began my current analysis of the pre-suicide Heaven's Gate e-mail campaign by asking the question: "Did these individuals really want to 'recruit' new members through mass posting to news-groups?" And, if so, to what degree is it really possible for such groups be able to create suicidal mass movements? Simply enough, I have come to the conclusion that the answers these questions are: "no" and "little." In this article, however, I will only be able to really focus on

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2 Please see my 1997 *Western Folklore* article: "Apocalypse in your In-Box: End-Times Communication on the

what the goal of the Heaven's Gate group posters was. Based on their rhetorical moves, it was

not mass recruitment. Although at least one of them was capable of the reasonable persuasive

rhetoric common to Internet discourse, it was only employed once. Because they make no

attempt to persuade non-believers, their most ambitious goal must have been the location of

individuals already spiritually prepared for a Heaven's Gate conversion experience.

In this article, I want to emphasize the attitude I have taken toward the Heaven's Gate

suicides. This attitude is a "not-so-horribly-biased" one. I do not deny the subjectivity of all my

observations, but I have attempted to approach the Heaven's Gate e-mail campaign with an open

and educated mind. I have attempted to follow their arguments from my own position. I have

tried to imagine their influence over various possible audiences. In this way, I hope that my

honesty and integrity in this endeavor will be apparent.

When the Heaven's Gate story broke into the mass media, I had been investigating

Internet millennial communication for almost three years. I heard the news and didn't really

have any choice but to immediately try to gather and engage as much of the Heaven's Gate data

as I could. I was asking the same thing everybody else was: "Why would 39 individuals not so

unlike myself choose to take their own lives?" It is a question that I have attempted to answer
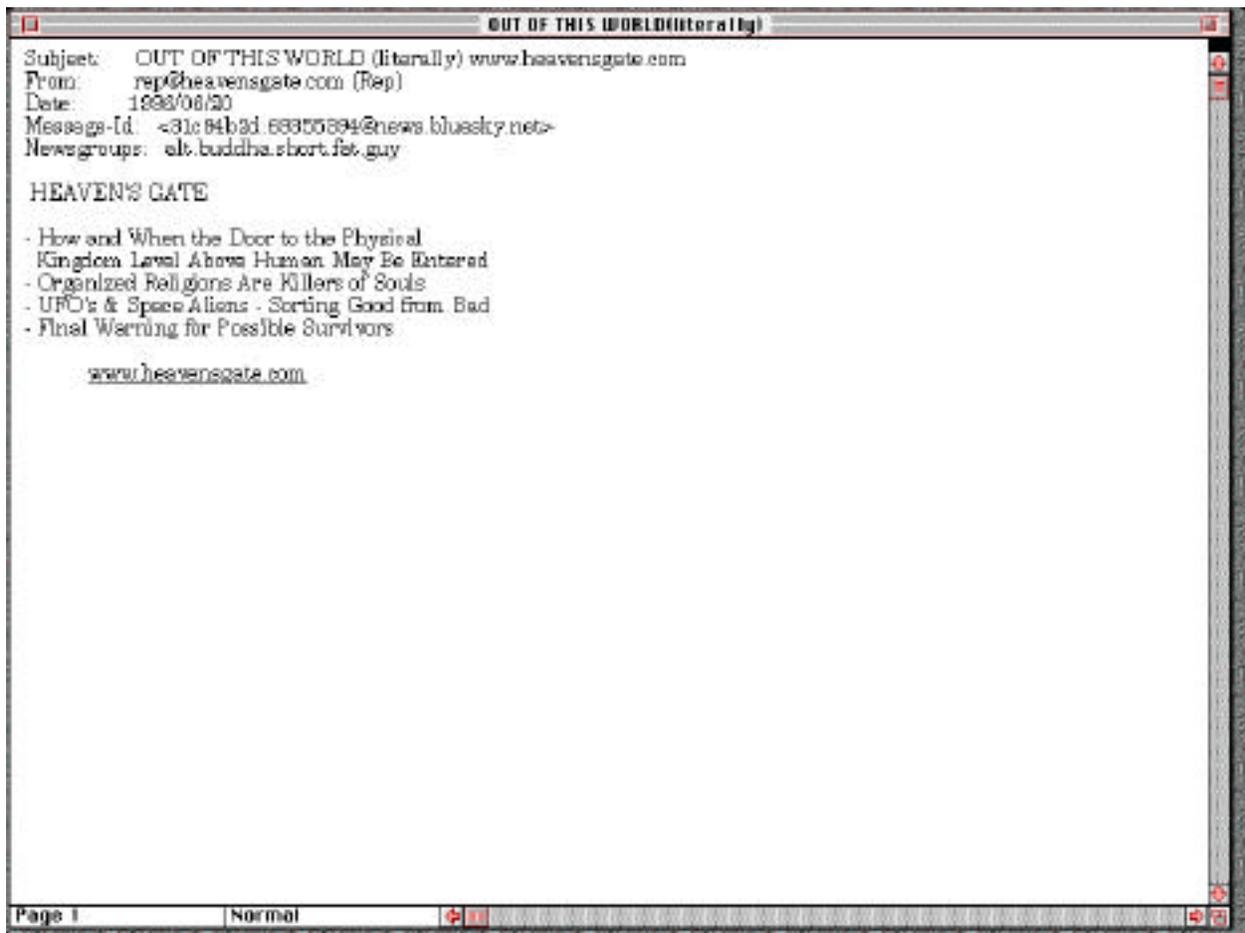
ever since.

To take an attitude toward the tragic that dismisses it or places it on a lower intellectual

plane than our own is to fail to properly situate our selves as questioning observers. I refuse,

even now, to judge the "apocalyptic others." I, instead, seek to understand their actions on their

own terms—and with sympathy. There is, however, an element of danger in this plan. What if

Do and his followers really were right? I guess it is evident that I don't think they were. I am

Internet."

writing this article today. I have not attempted to join the Mothership. Still, every time I engage

the strange mass of data they left behind, I try my best to risk the possibility that they may be

right after all.

To make sure I have gotten a real good dose of this data, I have collected some 11.3

megabytes of it onto my hard-drives. To make sure I have something reasonably focused to say

here, I am only engaging the pre-suicide "recruitment" posts that were produced by the Heaven's

Gate group almost a year after the abortive 1995 Internet communications Do mentioned above.

This second flurry of Internet activity was comprised of the now famous World-Wide-Web site

as well as mass newsgroup posting. A variety of Heaven's Gate associated e-mail addresses sent

a series of posts to over 80 different newsgroups during 1996. The vast majority of the posts

were the duplicates of the same message. They were, in computer lingo, "spam"—the electronic

equivalent of junk mail.

This 1996 series began on June sixth. One short e-mail was posted to the most newsgroups and on a number of occasions. It would have appeared very much like figure four.

Figure 4

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┌─────────────────────────── OUT OF THIS WORLD(literally) ───────────────────────────┐
│ Subject:    OUT OF THIS WORLD (literally) www.heavensgate.com                        │
│ From:       rep@heavensgate.com (Rep)                                                │
│ Date:       1996/06/20                                                               │
│ Message-Id: <31c84b3d.68355894@news.bluesky.net>                                     │
│ Newsgroups: alt.buddha.short.fat.guy                                                 │
│                                                                                      │
│  HEAVEN'S GATE                                                                       │
│                                                                                      │
│ - How and When the Door to the Physical                                             │
│   Kingdom Level Above Human May Be Entered                                           │
│ - Organized Religions Are Killers of Souls                                          │
│ - UFO's & Space Aliens - Sorting Good from Bad                                       │
│ - Final Warning for Possible Survivors                                              │
│                                                                                      │
│        www.heavensgate.com                                                          │
│                                                                                      │
│                                                                                      │
│ Page 1           Normal                                                             │
└──────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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The last line was a click-able link directly to the elaborate web-site that laid out their beliefs in detail—the front page of which is depicted in figure five.

Figure 5

Though this post was the most widely distributed and was even re-posted on several dates following June 6, there was almost no response to it in the newsgroups. I have located only three. One responded curtly: "that's nice dear, now go sit back down and count your breaths."

In August of 1996, another more aggressive series of posts began to come from a Heaven's Gate domain name. There were at least six distinct varieties. Each presents similar claims. All of them were mass posted to a wide variety of Internet news groups. All of them

employed very similar rhetorical strategies. One of these messages, a mass-posting of 866

words, appealed to those who desire to enter the "Evolutionary Level Above Human." I have

represented this post in figure six.

Figure 6
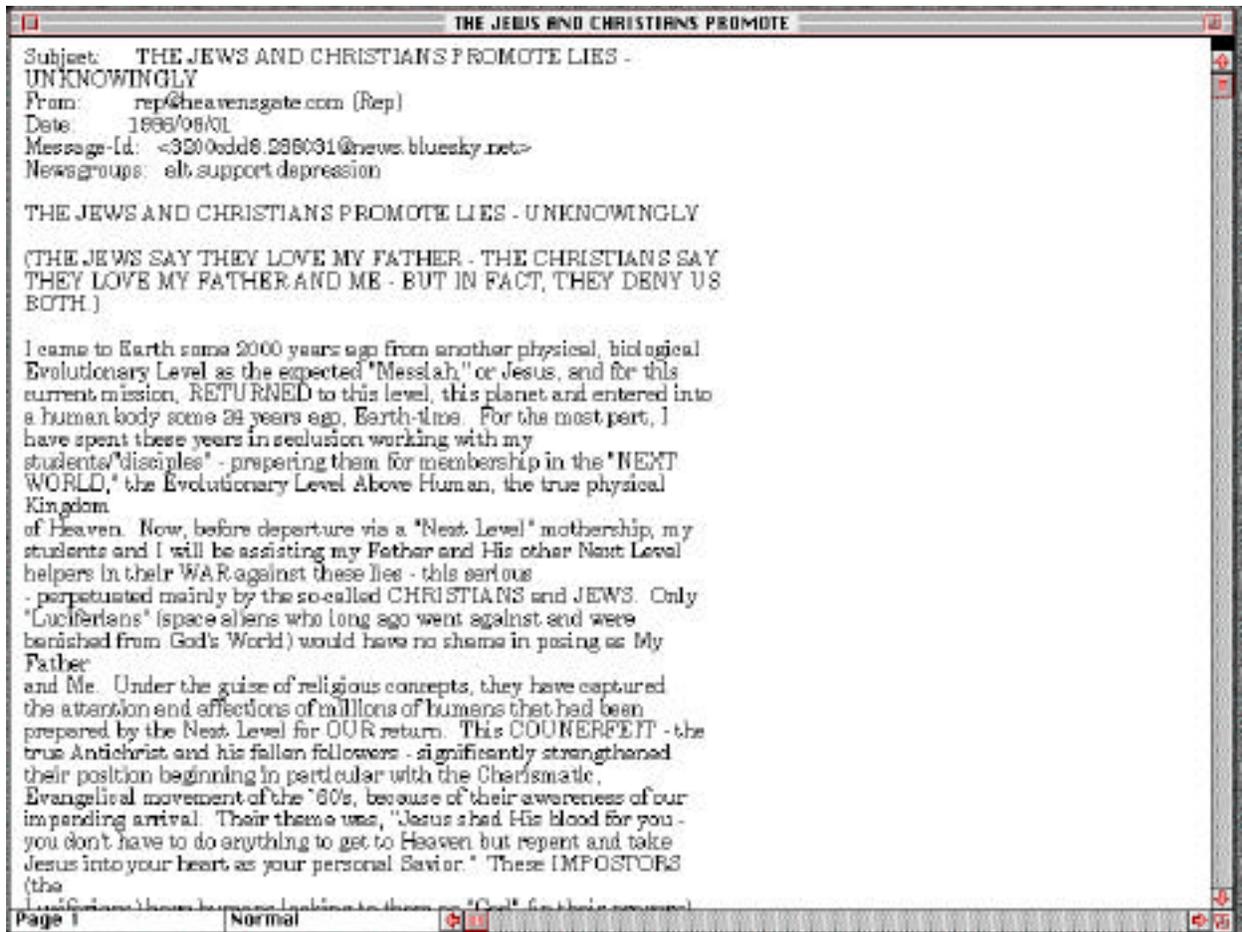
It begins: "I came to Earth some 2000 years ago from another physical, biological,

Evolutionary Level as the expected 'Messiah,' or Jesus, and for this current mission,

RETURNED to this level, this planet and entered into a human body some 24 years ago, Earth-

time."

Within the various discourse communities that this post appealed to, none were likely to easily accept an assertion based upon the ethos of an e-mailing Jesus. I, as a not-so-biased observer, also immediately reject this sort of claim. This argument, as do most of their arguments, fails on a grand scale. What then, I began to wonder all over again, is going on with these people? They must just be stupid or nuts! Of course, stupid people cannot build such complex and beautiful web-sites. Maybe they are nuts—but then, inquiring with a sympathetic desire into in *just what way* they are nuts, I came to realize that they at least one of their group was fully capable of engaging in argumentation that was rational and effective. For me, anyway, that person would have to, in fact, not be nuts.[3]

This evidence came on December 12, 1996 in the form of a different sort of newsgroup post. It met with a much more engaged and considerate audience. From the rhetorical moves employed, it is clear why this happened. It *tries* to persuade. Its rhetoric posits that its audience is reasonable and can be persuaded. In so doing, it meets with a rush of negative, but, again, *engaged*, response[4].

The post begins: "Here's a round of applause to the Church of Scientology for their courageous action against the Cult Awareness Network."[5] It must have been clear to the poster that the idea that the Church of Scientology was a good thing would meet with a lot of resistance on the alt.religion.scientology newsgroup. This newsgroup is generally devoted to berating the Church—though some supporters also participate. The claim that the Church of Scientology did

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[3] When I suggest that a claim is "reasonable" I mean it in the technical sense. I get this sense from the work of Kenneth Burke, Wayne Booth, and Chaim Perelman among others. A "reasonable" assertion is one that I accept as more or less true based on my understanding of the reasons behind it. Generally, if an assertion is "unreasonable" I consider the argument to be wrong. However, if a person consistently argues in an unreasonable fashion, I entertain the possibility that they have not learned to conduct themselves according to the social norms of our society. If that is true, it may be that they are incapable of "reasoning." Though I am not a psychologist, I assume that habitual actions rejecting social norms are, at least, a potential indication of insanity.
[4] For a sense of what I mean by "engaged," please see Gage (1991).

something good would immediately be at issue. Still, the idea that underlies it would not be: *that acting in a courageous fashion is a good thing.*

The next line of the post specifically admits alternate perspectives: "from our point of view . . . " The post is, apparently, a response to a indictment of the Heaven's Gate group by, what was, at the time, the notoriously anti-New Age and pro-Christian organization known as CAN. CAN "condemned the innocent." When it "accused our group of 'cult activities' promoting all sorts of lies about us. When we asked to speak to them to correct some of their false accusations, they refuse to listen." The post concludes: "we hope you will all continue to advertise on behalf of freedom of thinking for all."

In this post, the initial idea is that it is good to be courageous. CAN is accused lying. Then it is accused of "refusing to listen." CAN is portrayed as decidedly dogmatic. This dogmatism is contrasted with the idea that each party should have to opportunity to present its case in order to judge the truth of the claim. Then, this open-forum attitude is linked to a basic, and commonly held, belief in the value of free speech and thought. The post encourages and allies itself with those who "advertise on behalf of freed of thinking for all."

The response to this post was much smaller. It was only posted to one newsgroup and was directed at the audience specific to this newsgroup in a persuasive manner. Two of its five responses unquestionably engaged the post critically.

One of these engaging responders takes up the claim that "cults" encourage free thinking. This response attacks the means that he or she assumes such groups use: "is it that whatever organization you claim to represent . . . considers that the means justify the end, no matter what those means may be?" It goes on to engage the Heaven's Gate post in a section by section

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[5]   As an aside, I should note that currently the Church of Scientology, in a legal and financial coup, has purchased

criticism. The final section the initial post describes a historical need for so-called "cult" groups. The responder replies to the assertion:

> History has also proven that many organizations that make such claims (such as the National Socialists in Germany, the Order of the Solar Temple, Jim Jones' mob, Scientology, and the Moonies, to name but a handful) are capable of causing a considerable amount of damage to both their own members, and innocent third parties.

OK—the rhetoric *is* full of angry emotions. Still, it responds to this Heaven's Gate post in a way only made possible by the rhetorical position that this initial post takes up. The Heaven's Gate post is an open invitation to debate that seeks to persuade an audience clearly conceived of as reasonable and persuadable. The responder, in turn, is clearly aware, and in fact may expect, that the Heaven's Gate poster may be reading and ready to reply. The responder says: "and, before you even think about suggesting it, no: this is not a case of self-regulation."

What is my point with all this? It is a simple one. *At least one Heaven's Gate group member had the ability to both hold beliefs that seem to us totally unreasonable and, at the same time, engage in reasonable argumentation at a fairly advanced level.* How could this be? If a person is persuadable through reasoned argument are they not also highly unlikely to respond to the ridiculously unreasonable assertions in the majority of their posts? How did this reasonable person come to be posting propaganda for Heaven's Gate? Even more to the point: why would they choose to use totally unreasonable arguments in their recruitment posts when they both understood and were able to use reasonable argumentation?

To answer this last question, let's look again at Figure 6. This post was part of the an August 1, 1996 series of mass mailings. It seeks to discredit "unknowing" promoters of lies including "JEWS AND CHRISTIANS." It claims: "They are in service of "the true Antichrist

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CAN. Needless to say, though CAN still exists, it is rather more tolerant of the Scientologists than it used to be!

and his fallen followers" the "'Luciferians.'" Although the post clearly appeals to a Christian symbolic system, it is destine to fail even among the Christian Internet community—in whom it *might* find a sympathetic ear. It attacks them directly with a virulent sort of dogmatism: "The true antichrist and his fallen followers significantly strengthened their position beginning in particular with the Charismatic Evangelical movement of the 1960's."

It is easy to see how badly such a rhetorical stance might fail. For the non-Christian, prophecies about any "anti-christ" are absurd. For the millennial Christian, direct attacks on evangelic preaching would probably not be meet with much sympathy.

But what if I am a Christian who is involved in, but somewhat dissatisfied, with his or her Christianity? I *might* step off the boat. I *might* provisionally accept the argument and continue to consider it.

Some 250 words of the post are devoted to quoting the gospels of Luke and John in support of the post's assertions. Further, the reader is implored to look to the Bible in new ways: "a true seeker who really wants to know what Jesus required of His disciples in order to go with him into his Father's Kingdom would read what JESUS SAID (His sayings in the Red Letter edition) on these subjects in the gospels." For many Protestants, this statement would be entirely acceptable. The text of the Bible is, in Protestant belief, the primary avenue to truth.

Still, no such hypothetical Christians seem to have responded to this post positively. Instead, the members of the various discourse communities that did respond, did so with dissmisive derision and a little fear. One reply that exemplified the general attitude taken towards the post stated: "I'm sorry, this is the wrong mental illness group. This is alt.support.depression. You must be looking for alt.support.eschatological-delusions. Common mistake."

Another individual who appears to be both Christian and involved in the Christian militia movements rejected the post flatly based on its topical irrelevance to that particular newsgroup: "Get bent, and you can use the cross you rode in on to do it, too. When you have something to say about Militias (this being a *Militia* newsgroup --- alt.religion.nutter is two doors down yonder), talk to us."

There were 50 similar responses that I was able to locate and possibly many more. From just these couple of examples, it is clear that there was no critical engagement of this post's rhetorical position—and could anybody really expect there to be?

The post asserts that Jesus has embodied as human and is sending the e-mailed message. It seems like the claim made by an individual with a very thin grasp of social norms—but there is evidence it is not. When they want to, somebody in the group did have a very good grasp of normative Internet discourse. Further, these individuals were highly versed in technical Internet usage. They built web-sites professionally. The poster or posters of most of these posts must have been quite aware that the vast majority of his or her posting would fail. Why didn't they care? That is the question that has been goading me, and hopefully you, for the last twenty minutes or so. The answer is really rather simple as far as I can say. The Heaven's Gate e-mail campaign posters didn't care because, in their view, their posts did not fail.

As I have shown, the Heaven's Gate mechanism that generated the 1996 e-mail campaign posts was capable of effectively engaging in typical Internet discourse. They were more than a little Internet savvy. Their web-pages prove that. They were news-group savvy as the CAN post proves. They were capable of presenting an argument in a reasoned and provocative fashion. *The posters could have tried to convince people to join their group but they did not.*

So then. If persuasion what not their goal, what was? The only reasonable remaining

theory for just what the Heaven's Gate e-mail campaign posters were trying to do is simple

enough. They have almost said as much themselves. The aim of the e-mail campaign was to

find individuals already in a spiritual and emotional state that made them ready to negate

argument—that made them ready for an emotive conversion experience.

This emotional state is what I, for lack of a better word, have called a "convertible" state.

The posts were seeking to locate convertible people.[6] Those convertible people are individuals

whose minds, for whatever reason, are already ready to set aside normative social mechanisms

and join the Heaven's Gate community. These sorts of people must have been the target

audience of the posts. It might be interesting to note, however, from my scouring of the

journalistic data, that there were no pre-suicide conversions through the Internet. Their attempt

to find people, it seems, more or less failed.

This is, in the end, the important result that all my modest-observing yields: the

individuals who were ready to enter into a social situation such as the Heaven's Gate group

offered did so—and, from the vast pool of those out on the Internet, there just are not many

people who were up to snuff. I, for one, am not. This is, of course, just what the Heaven's Gate

group members kept saying all along. I quoted Do at the outset: "the world is not ready." In

closing, I will quote maybe the one remaining close follower of Do and his followers at the time

of the suicides.

Starting in August of 1997, Ric, the man I actually talked to, was still out on the Internet

saying just this: "the world is not ready." He was still out trying to allow those few convertible

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[6]   As I like to put it, with a healthy dose of Kenneth Burke's sense of the "comic," "The Heaven's Gate Group
leaders went to California . . . looking for convertibles." For a full application of Burke's ideas of "comic" and
"tragic" to millennial movements, see O'Leary (1994).

individuals access to the information they so desperately needed. Figure seven represents the first

page of his last web site.

Figure 7
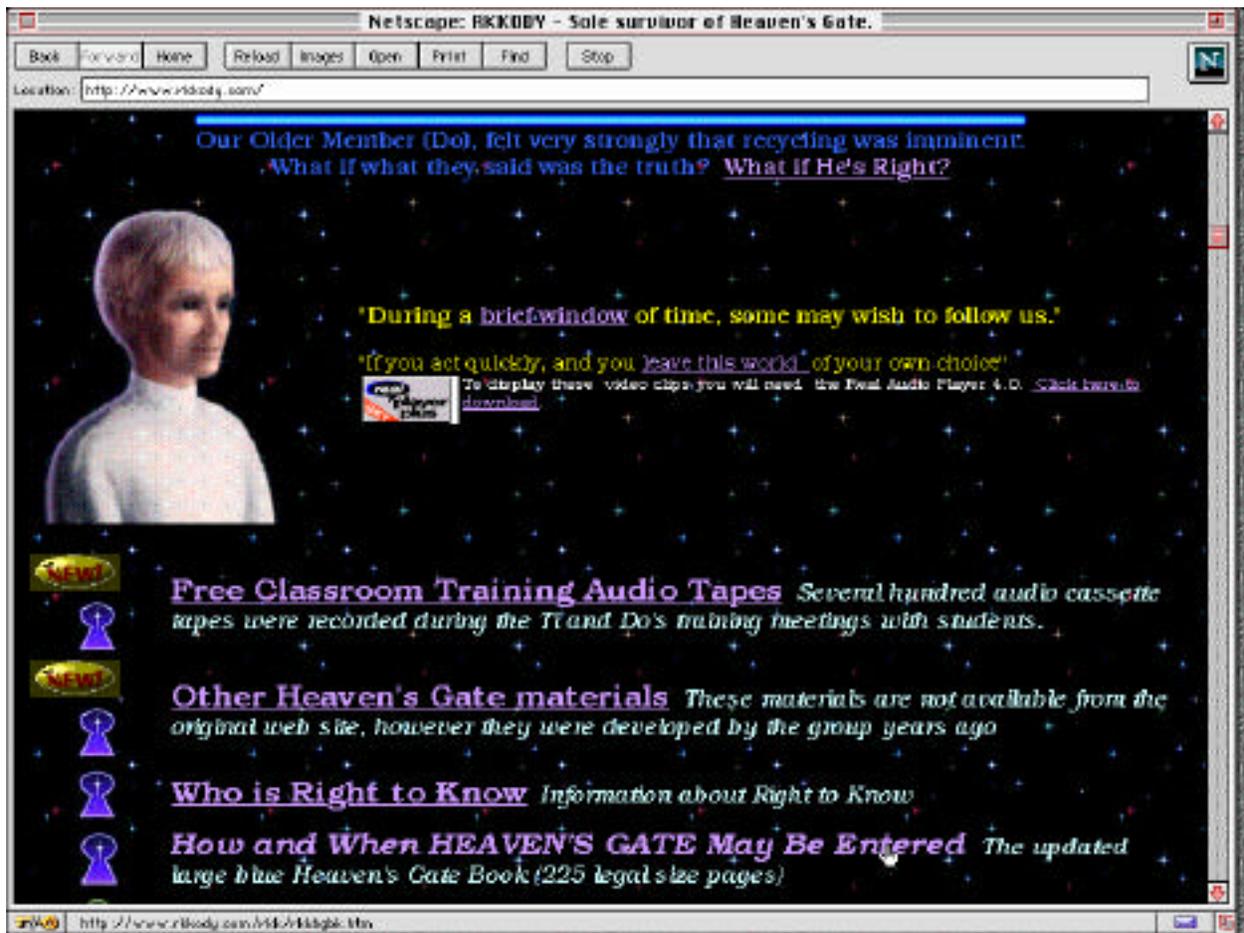
A few days before February seventeenth, he drove from San Diego into the empty

Arizona desert, put up a small tent, and ran tubing into it from the exhaust pipe of his car. He

left the care running and held a plastic bag over his head. He wore the, now familar, Heaven's

Gate clothing. Near his body he left the simple note: "DO NOT REVIVE"(Thorton 1998).

Nine months before this episode, the last two followers of Do attempted suicide. One

was successful. The other one was "Rick-o'-de"—or just "Ric" as he asked me to call him.

After coming out of a coma as a result of the first suicide attempt, Ric created a new web site. I came across it, and e-mailed him questions about my research. We engaged in an e-mail exchange that was both lively and intriguing. He felt that he had been left behind to help explain and propagate the ideas of Do.

I asked him about the expected audience and the intentions of the e-mailed posts. He responded:

> We offered the information and let free will take over. It was designed by our Creator that only those who had been given a special 'gift' of recognition, would be drawn towards this material. I know that sounds very sci-fi, but if you really take a good look at the record of Jesus' ministry you would see that Ti and Do brought the very same formula for entry into the Kingdom of Heaven. The message then was only meant for those who have ears to hear, and it is the same today.(Rkkody 1997)

The one thing that haunts me most about my whole last twelve or so months of examining the Heaven's Gate data is this: as unreasonable in a socially normative sense, as insane really, as the beliefs and actions of these individuals were, they *knew* exactly what they *intended* to do and, by their own of standards of judgment as well as by my best rhetorical analysis, these people *did* just exactly what they wanted to do. For me, these facts do not sit comfortably next to the reality of what it was they were doing. What they wanted to do and how they did it, I think I understand. Why they did it, still remains shrouded in a world of deeply *felt* belief—in a world, not outside of, but though and beyond the bounds of reasonable, of socially normative, contemporary Internet discourse.

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