

The suicides in San Diego

The WSWS Editorial Board
14 April 2014

The pathetic death of 39 people in San Diego, the largest group suicide in the history of the United States, is a sad and disturbing event. While the media sensationalizes the more bizarre aspects of this tragedy, the fundamental fact is that 39 human beings killed themselves, most of them in the prime of life, leaving behind families and many children, because they believed they had nothing to live for in American society.

References to insanity or to “brainwashing” by a cult leader explain little or nothing about this tragedy. No doubt the beliefs and the final actions of the Heaven’s Gate group were insane, but there is no indication in the background of those who died that they were afflicted with mental illness in a clinical sense. As for the role of Marshall Applewhite and Bonnie Lu Nettles, what must be explained is precisely how two individuals could come to exert such inordinate influence over a larger group, to the point of inducing them to take their own lives.

The victims came from a wide range of social backgrounds: the son of a telephone company CEO, the daughter of a federal judge, the brother of former television star Nichelle Nichols, a carpenter, a paralegal assistant, the teenage son of an English professor, a middle-aged Iowa housewife and grandmother, a postal supervisor who abandoned her five children, a real estate investor and former Republican congressional candidate who abandoned his wife and six children.

Many of the individuals involved had encountered some kind of serious personal crisis—death of a loved one, divorce, setbacks in their jobs, financial difficulties—shortly before they dropped out and became followers of Applewhite and Lu Nettles. Others were simply young people at loose ends after finishing high school or college.

The pressures they encountered are, of course, common in American life, and the vast majority of those who face such problems do not abandon their families, join a religious cult and commit suicide. Nonetheless, this tragic waste of life has a broader significance. It raises troubling questions about social forces which affect broad layers of the American population.

The role of religion

In no other advanced industrialized country are so much of the social and economic resources of society given over to the systematic promotion of religious mysticism and other forms of ideological backwardness. The reality of the supernatural is taught in American schools and saturates the media and popular culture. All this serves a vital social function, disorienting masses of people who might otherwise express their discontent by turning their energies toward the

transformation of society.

Religion arose historically out of man’s subordination to natural and social processes which he did not comprehend. The primitive gods of thunder, lightning, wind and sea were the personifications of natural forces which primitive man could not understand but sought to propitiate. In the more developed universal religions, such as Christianity and Islam, the hundreds of individual gods become amalgamated into a single, universal and omnipotent deity, the abstracted essence of all that man did not know and could not control in nature and his own society.

Man has gained increasing mastery of the natural world, not only understanding it theoretically but putting to his own use forces which he previously worshipped blindly. But social and economic life remains largely uncomprehended and entirely outside the control of ordinary people. Hence the persistence of religious conceptions, which serve not only as a substitute for knowledge, but as a consolation for the trials and tribulations of those who are victims of the blind forces of the capitalist market.

Especially important in this respect is the promise of resurrection and personal immortality, the hope given to the downtrodden masses that they will have a better life in the hereafter than the one which they are afforded by the present social order. These conceptions were the core of the belief system of the Heaven’s Gate group, who looked upon their own deaths, not as final extinction, but as passage to a better place. In this they were only parroting the so-called mainstream churches. As one newspaper columnist asked, in a rare moment of critical thought in the mass media, “Were the members of Heaven’s Gate really all that nutty? It’s a good question to ponder on Easter Sunday, the day the world’s 1.5 billion Christians celebrate the resurrection from the dead of a man born to a virgin.”

The social crisis in America

As the social polarization in America has deepened over the past two decades, there has been a noticeable rise in the influence of religion and other forms of superstition—New Age, belief in UFOs, the occult. This is not merely the result of official promotion, as in the attempts to introduce “creation science” into the schools in place of the teaching of evolution.

America has long been characterized by a myriad of bizarre religious sects, which have multiplied in number and influence during periods of intense social crisis. This has deep roots in the ideological dominance of pragmatism and individualism, with their emphasis on personal experience as the criterion of truth, as opposed to the development of a coherent theoretical structure.

Even those who develop scientific knowledge in one or another specialized area do not develop a more generalized conception. Thus the phenomenon, so common in America, of people with high levels of technical and scientific training—astronauts, computer experts, physicists—who nonetheless believe in god, UFOs or reincarnation. According to a survey published April 3 in the journal *Nature*, 40 percent of all scientists believe in a personal god who answers prayers, 50 percent believed in personal immortality, and 85 percent believed in god in some sense or other. Moreover, those trained in the “hard” sciences like physics and chemistry were more likely to be religious than those trained in disciplines such as anthropology and psychology.

The revolutionary developments in technology, especially in the last several decades, reinforce rather than undermine the dominance of religion, because they enter people’s lives in a disruptive and poorly comprehended manner, undigested intellectually because those who are compelled to adapt themselves to the new technology do not possess an integrated scientific world outlook. Above all, the new technology confronts masses of people as a hostile force because it is put to the service of private wealth, not human needs. While this technology could, under social ownership, open up enormous possibilities for the creation of a better life, under private ownership it means corporate downsizing, mass layoffs and the wholesale lowering of living standards.

The role of the media

For the popular masses, the supermarket tabloids which are the most widely circulated publications in America devote much of their space to alien abductions and other UFO-related fantasies, as well as astrology and the occult. The most publicized show on television, *The X-Files*, mixes UFO paranoia and other popular superstitions in roughly equal proportions. And it is not just a matter of what is loosely labeled “popular culture.” The most staid organs of the establishment promote religious obscurantism. *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines each ran recent cover stories on the reality of angels and the power of prayer.

It is noteworthy that these corporate-controlled media played a significant role in promoting the activities of Applewhite and Nettles. Shortly after they began to set up their group, in the mid-1970s, they received intense and sensationalized media coverage, with articles in the *New York Times* magazine (1975), *Time* (1976 and 1979) and *Newsweek* (1979). Hollywood came calling, as NBC prepared and actually broadcast a series pilot called *The Mysterious Two*, about an extraterrestrial couple roaming the earth, starring John Forsythe in the Applewhite role and Phyllis Pointer as Nettles. The original title of the program, grimly ironic today, was *Follow Me If You Dare*.

Spiritualism reaches into the White House. While the media derides Applewhite and his followers as the lunatic fringe, it is well known that President Ronald Reagan was a confirmed believer in an impending Armageddon and Day of Judgment, which gave a chilling undertone to his breezy pronouncements on nuclear war. His wife Nancy regularly consulted an astrologer to determine auspicious dates for her husband’s official activities.

The current White House has seen similar activities, with Clinton consulting a variety of advocates of spiritual and moral quackery, and inviting Robert Schuller, one of the few unindicted television

preachers, to take the seat of honor next to Hillary Clinton at his State of the Union speech.

The ideology of Heaven’s Gate was thus an eclectic mix of elements which are widely available in American culture, and which required only final assembly by the group’s leaders. Applewhite, a minister’s son who attended Union Theological Seminary, then spent much of his adult life working in Houston, the headquarters of NASA, developed a world view which combined the Book of Revelations with speculations about aliens and space travel.

Victims of society

When Karl Marx wrote that religion is the opiate of the masses, he was not seeking merely to scandalize the true believers, but to make a scientific characterization of the social and class role of religious belief. As the events in San Diego demonstrate, in the most extreme cases, religion serves not only as opium, but as cyanide.

Those who died in the Heaven’s Gate suicides were the victims of a society which produces among millions of people a sense that they lack any future. “I felt angry, alienated, hopeless, incomplete and utterly unsatisfied in this world no matter what I tried,” wrote one member about his reasons for joining the group. These feelings, if not their suicidal conclusion, are commonplace in a society where the value of a human being is judged solely by the size of their bank account or credit line, where social needs are subordinated to an ever more irrational system of production for private profit.

The terrible pessimism expressed in the self-destruction of 39 people has a material source, in the current absence of a significant movement for social change in the United States. The entry of broad masses of working people into struggle against the existing social order—the inevitable product of great social, economic and political shocks—will break up the present reactionary political climate and bring a new mood of optimism and confidence in the future.



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