

VIEW FROM HERE

Heavengate

The current ruckus surrounding the danger of cults ignores the fact that the United States was founded by cultists

by Patricia Nell Warren

As the nation goes into a cult panic over the Heaven's Gate mass suicide, I am amazed how fast some people forget our long national coziness with cults. Unkind things about cults are being said or implied by newpeople, commentators and "cult experts." It seems that cults are scary. Cults are un-Christian. Cults are New Age. Cults are dangerous. Public figures rush to be first to call loudly for "something to be done about cults." On one talk show, a distinguished guest suggested that the Constitution be amended "to keep this kind of thing from happening."

In a word, Heaven's Gate is being turned into Heavengate.

I notice that many "cult experts" on the news have religious-right affiliations. Yes, the religious right is planning to have a field day with Heaven's Gate. New Agers are high on its hit list. Now the religious right sees its big chance: to use 39 deaths as an excuse to blacken a movement with hundreds of thousands of adherents. According to CNN and *Washington Post* stories, Heaven's Gate leader Marshall Applewhite was homosexual. The religious right will probably twist this fact into one more "proof" that cults are bad.

Hmm. Surely saner minds remember the Jesus freaks of the '70s? In those days, some counter-cult activists nabbed minors out of extremist Christian groups and returned them to their parents for "de-programming." Some of today's religious-right leaders were considered Jesus freaks when they were young. So their memory about "cults" is conveniently short.

Today the word "cult" has an eerie connotation that doesn't fit the more benign groups. Even some benign cults center on an obsessive control by the group's leader, and obsessive obedience by the members. But this kind of mind control isn't limited to marginalized little groups. It can be found in the shadow of every religion and spiritual system in the world, including mainstream Christianity.

In marketing its anti-cult line to the public, the religious right will trade on many people's queasiness about suicide. As a rule, religious-right cult groups don't preach violence against the self. But some preach violence against others. Some war on people of color. Others war on gay people. Still

others war on abortion, tree-huggers or the federal government. In my opinion, any religious-right group that operates on that same obsessive control of others is deserving of the same media splash and investigative scrutiny as Heaven's Gate.

The truth is, "cults" have always been part of the U.S. scene. Little groups of believers who emigrated here—Quakers, Jews, Congregationalists, Anabaptists, Pilgrims, Masons—were persecuted in Europe as "scary cults." That's why they fled to the United States! Later came Mormons, Transcendentalists, Mennonites, Hutterites, Christian Scientists, the Ghost Dance, to name a few—all considered very dangerous by the more intolerant descendants of our cultish founders. Cults are a star-spangled part of the American tradition.

Protestants even considered Catholics dangerous when the latter emigrated here in force in the 1800s. Today some Protestants still have fits over Catholic "idol worship." Catholics themselves even use the word "cult," as in "cult of Mary." But I don't see Protestants trying to amend the Constitution so that Catholic cultism can be "prevented."

Last but not least, the anti-cult script calls for cyberspace to be vilified as a hotbed of cults. "Spiritual predators" are said to be joining sexual predators in the hunt for children. Fiddle-dee-dee. In a nation founded on culthood, the new cults never had a problem recruiting, whether it was by radio, phone, telegraph or Pony Express. Today's recruitment includes television evangelists—whose financial and "healing" practices have been questioned—proving that controllers don't need the Internet to find people who want to be told what to think.

How odd to blame the Internet, when television and radio news coverage have given Heaven's Gate a billion dollars' worth of free publicity in the past few days.

So before we go off the deep end—launching witch hunts and passing a bunch of anti-cult laws—let's make sure we don't shoot ourselves in our cultish foot.

Patricia Nell Warren is author of The Front Runner and other books.

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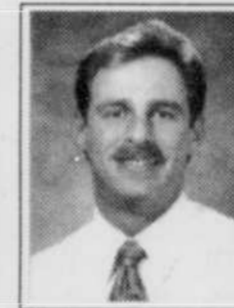
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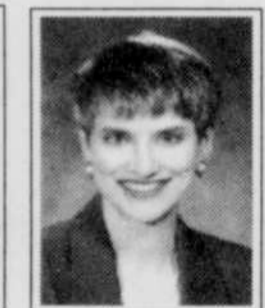
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Lauren Kessler

Upcoming & Events

Sunday, April 20th 2 pm

Lauren Kessler, author of *Full Court Press: A Season in the Life of a Winning Basketball Team and the Women Who Made It Happen* (Dutton), celebrates the excitement, tension and drama of women's basketball and explores the meaning of being a female athlete in America today. Kessler focuses on a season in the life of an underdog team and creates a portrait of the coach who took a losing squad and made it into a winning team.

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