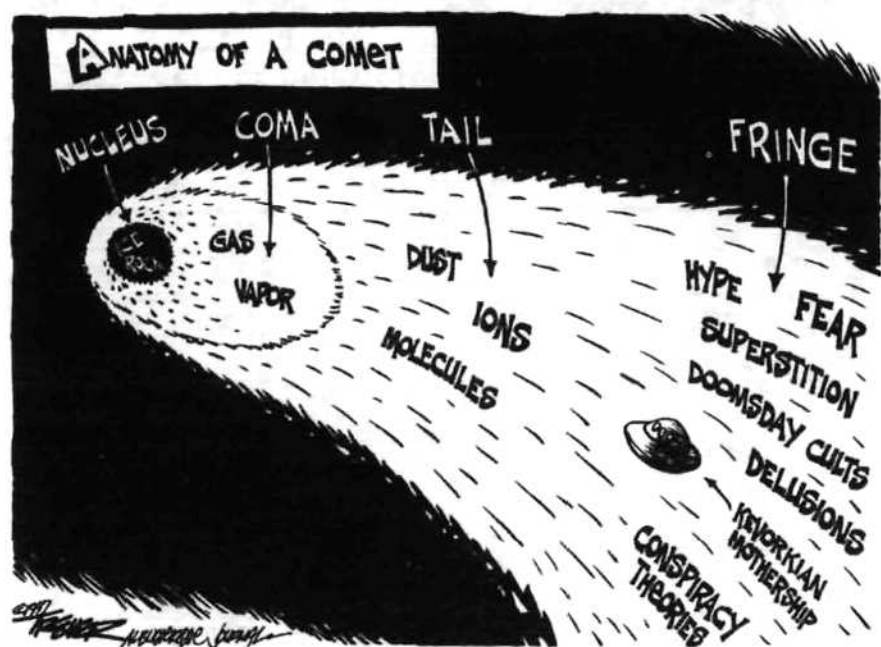


Art Bell, Heaven's Gate, and Journalistic Integrity

THOMAS C. GENONI JR.



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Following the Heaven's Gate suicides, the public learned that news of a "companion UFO" trailing Comet Hale-Bopp—a rumor spread predominately by late-night talk radio host Art Bell—may well have contributed to cult members taking their lives in an attempt to "graduate," as their Web site described it, to a "higher level" and leave Earth in a spacecraft. Bell will tell you he did nothing wrong. The full story reveals it's not quite that simple.

The Art Bell Show, officially *Coast to*

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Coast AM, began roughly thirteen years ago and is America's most syndicated late-night talk radio program. Carried five days a week on AM stations throughout the country (with a sixth show called *Dreamland* on Sundays), it regularly features a parade of paranormal oddities.

Theories about a strange object near Hale-Bopp were first made public in November of last year when Chuck Shramek, an amateur astronomer from Houston, called Art Bell's program to report that a photograph of his appeared to show a large object behind the comet, an object he speculated to be up to four times the size of Earth. The following night, Courtney Brown, a tenured professor of political science at Emory University and director of the Farsight Institute in Atlanta, was a guest on Bell's

show and claimed that three "remote viewers" associated with his institute had confirmed Shramek's findings and, incredibly, had determined it to be a metallic object full of aliens. As further proof, Brown sent Bell a photograph of the Hale-Bopp "companion" (allegedly taken by someone Brown identified only as a "top-ten university astronomer") on the condition that Bell hold off displaying the image on his Web page until the astronomer in question held a news conference. (Meanwhile, astronomers analyzing Shramek's mystery object concluded it was a misidentified star, though Shramek continues to dispute this.) After two months of waiting for the secret astronomer to come forward (time also spent feeding the Hale-Bopp UFO hype), Bell decided to post the secret photograph. One day later Bell was contacted by Oliver Hainut and David Tholen, both professors from the University of Hawaii, who said that Brown's image was merely a doctored copy of one of their recent comet photos, and they provided a comparison to prove it. The image was a fake.

As one might expect, Bell took a number of steps to distance himself from the very controversy he had spent so much time promoting. Brown, who had enjoyed frequent publicity on Bell's program, was no longer welcome (to this day Brown refuses to reveal the mystery astronomer's identity). Links previously advancing the UFO story—including audio files of the November shows containing the early Hale-Bopp "companion" discussions—disappeared from Bell's Web pages. (Bell says that all of the audio files from those November shows

were lost when a hard drive crashed.) Russel Sipe, an Internet expert who maintains a popular Internet site devoted to educating the public and combating the pseudoscience linked to the comet (www.halebopp.com), also noted that when Alan Hale paid a visit to the radio program in early March, Bell "talked about the magnificence of the comet . . . and even seemed to suggest that there was no evidence for anomalous elements surrounding Hale-Bopp."

Despite the blatant reversal of position, Bell says he doesn't regret having publicized the Hale-Bopp UFO story. "You have to remember I had several sources," Bell explains. "In addition to Shramek's photo, I had a university professor at Emory who supplied us with photographic evidence of what he said was true." Keep in mind this is the same professor who, for a mere \$3,000, will teach students enrolled at his "Institute" to communicate with extraterrestrials. Nevertheless, Bell maintains that Brown and Shramek's evidence constituted

"sufficient material," and he seems unconcerned that his sources eventually proved to be totally unreliable.

What about the possibility that thirty-nine people ended their lives in part because of Bell's promotion of false information? Bell doubts the cult members incorporated the "companion UFO" story into their mass suicide decision. He says that in the weeks following the Courtney Brown debacle, the "entire fraud was heavily exposed" and that the revelations all occurred two months before the Rancho Santa Fe suicides. And in a further attempt to paint himself as just another innocent reporter at the mercy of his sources, Bell asserted that "the media had it totally, utterly wrong" in their initial reports of the numbers and ages of suicide victims, as if to compare his show's unsubstantiated and pretentious banter about a massive, comet-trailing alien craft to the act of gathering details during a breaking, tragic news story. Most important for Bell, though, is that the Heaven's Gate

members appeared to have been aware of the Hale-Bopp UFO debunking. The first line of their now infamous Web site reads: "Whether Hale-Bopp has a 'companion' or not is irrelevant from our perspective." However, the cult's Internet link to the Art Bell homepage also indicates it's likely they first heard about an approaching spaceship during Bell's two-month-long UFO escapade.

But whatever the Heaven's Gate cult members or anyone else may have done with the information presented on his radio show, Bell feels that is not his responsibility. "I'm not going to stop presenting my material because there are unstable people," he insists. "That's what the First Amendment is all about." Constitutional rights aside, Bell's wild Hale-Bopp tales have clearly extended beyond the confines of harmless late-night entertainment and have contributed yet another ominous paranormal myth to a public of both stable and "unstable" people regularly misinformed about science. □

A Heaven's Gate Recruiting Session in Colorado

In the spring of 1995 five representatives of what has since come to be known as Heaven's Gate were recruiting members at Koelbel Public Library in Littleton, Colorado. Two board members from the Rocky Mountain Skeptics, Bill Aldorfer and Becky Greben, attended that meeting. This is their account of what transpired.

When we arrived at the Littleton, Colorado, library in the spring of 1995, we were handed three legal-sized printed materials: "Crew From the Evolutionary Level Above Human Offers Last Chance to Advance Beyond Human," "Organized Religion (Especially Christian) Has Become the Primary Pulpit for Misinformation and the Great Cover-Up," and "UFOs, Space Aliens, and Their Final Fight for Earth's Spoils." No names, addresses, or phone numbers appeared in the materials. Authorship of only one document was attributed, and that was to "Today's Next Level Crew."

One of the five panel members opened by invoking a long period of silence "... to let the truth come in." They said our planet is an experiment to ascertain if humans can advance to a level above the human kingdom. To them, our level—an experiment—is only a stepping stone to the next level, which is a real place. Jesus exists on this next level and is therefore real proof that the higher level exists. UFOs, an essential part of their mythology, are monitoring the experiment and "... waiting to take the harvest from this planet."

The five members lectured on how the fallen angel, Lucifer, and his followers tempt humans with sex, egoism, bad habits, and poor judgment. Our addiction to these behaviors prevents us from seeing the "truth," from differentiating between what the "vehicle" (the body) wants and what the soul wants. Only by exercising mastery over the temptation to engage in these behaviors at this level can we gain the strength needed to control the more sophisticated "vehicle" in which our soul will reside at the next level. In preparation for entry to the next level, the "crew members" concentrate on changing their behavior. They claim not to engage in sex. They do not worship in the conventional sense, despite incorporating elements of Christian mythology into their system of belief. Their manifesto also contains some environmental references: the current environment is "corrupt," Earth is going to be "spaded under," our souls are going to be "recycled."

All of the panel members participated to one degree or another in articulating the group's position. The "education" of the members included suppression of their individuality and creativity, both of which were to be unleashed when they arrived at the next level. They were preparing to leave on the spacecraft—and soon, from the gist of their remarks. One of the "crew members" remarked, "It's time for us to be of service to the one who started the experiment."

—Bill Aldorfer