

# 1997 Presidential Address

## Mad, bad, or just invisible? Studies in Religion and “fringe” religions.

Majella Franzmann

*University of New England*

On 27th March this year, 39 members of the Heaven’s Gate religious group were found dead, apparently having committed suicide. There was a flurry of media activity, pictures of the bodies *in situ*, speculation about suicide or other reasons for death, and then a strong focus on the internet home page that the group had constructed, as well as the videos of “witness” by the members that came to light shortly after the incident. For the most part the reaction which I witnessed on my own campus and among the general public was humour, usually bad and/or black at that, and instructions for viewing the Hale-Bopp comet were almost inevitably accompanied by some instruction about not wearing Nike shoes.

Now that interest in the incident has died down, a review of the media coverage can be most instructive. As I began writing this address a quick browse in the internet search engine *Yahoo* brought sites offering the primary texts of the group.<sup>1</sup> Apart from these the related sites listed three categories that were still available: media (newspaper reports on line); economics/ business (including the offer of a t-shirt with the slogan “I was late for Heaven’s Gate”); and finally “religion”. The latter category contained only one (sub-)section, “Humor”, with the usual jokes and parodies. A second search engine, *AltaVista*, provided, for the most part, contributions by so-called “cult-busters” or people in new religious movements themselves, defending their own territory while defending Heaven’s Gate.

Both *The Washington Post* and *The Chicago Tribune* offered online sites under the category “Heaven’s Gate”. The majority of experts cited on the first pages were either cult hotline directors or cult “exit counsellors”. As the reports grew from the mere reporting of events to some attempt at analysis, the field of experts grew to include professors of psychology and psychiatrists, internet experts, and former members of new religious movements, now generally involved in “cult-busting” activities. The only representatives from the area of Studies in Religion, and even then not from a strictly university setting, although they are associated, were James R. Lewis and J. Gordon Melton of the Institute for the Study of American Religion.

*The New York Times* followed much the same pattern, the first page of the

paper together with the first page of the special report section on 28th March citing someone involved in cult-busting/cult exit counselling, a man researching a book on doomsday cults and another who had written "The UFO Encyclopaedia". Scholars of religion were heard on page 28 within the special report, in a section headed "The Theories". Much the same story can be told of the Australian newspapers, though here the emphasis leaned slightly more towards academics than the "cult-busters", who clearly have a much higher profile in the U.S.A. In summary though, for this particular story, Studies in Religion scholars were infrequently cited and only once in a front page article. Those who were given more than a phrase or sentence to comment, concentrated on the significance which the group found in the astronomical phenomenon of the comet, and the probability that people would continue to do so, no matter how technologically or scientifically sophisticated they might be.<sup>2</sup>

As one might have expected, the newspapers made links to any other apparent suicides or unusual activity from new religious groups, the Solar Temple group especially, but also the incidents at Jonestown and Waco. From this point there were other links to internet UFO/extra terrestrial-related religious groups such as the Realians or the Unarius movement. The general public reaction that I witnessed was that all of this was just plain crazy - and not "real" religion. Though the scholars who were interviewed did not make fun of the Heaven's Gate group there wasn't anything terribly constructive which they had to say. This is simply "mad" religion.

Oddly enough there was very little to be found in the media to link this incident to the Japanese group Aum Shinrikyō, and only one small reference by Alan Hale in his press interview to the Christian extremist beliefs of those responsible for the Oklahoma bombing. Thus there seemed to be an implicit boundary drawn on the issue of world denial - some groups choose to deny the world and leave, other groups deny the world, while remaining within it, by damaging it and its inhabitants.<sup>3</sup> I would suggest that the former are perceived to be "mad" (and often more so because of their links to extraterrestrial beings and so on, as in the case with Heaven's Gate) and the latter "bad". Let me move then to "bad" religion.

Last year Michael Pye wrote of the reaction in Japan to the Aum Shinrikyō group and their activities in an article, entitled "Aum Shinrikyō: Can Religious Studies Cope?" (Pye, 1996). It is not altogether clear what Pye's concerns are for the coping mechanisms of Religious Studies vis-à-vis the activities of this new religious movement in Japan. Certainly he suggests that Aum Shinrikyō is of concern for the overall well-being of other religions in Japan, and the whole incident has led to discussion about the term "religion" within the Japanese context, but where Studies in Religion itself is concerned, Pye notes vaguely that appraisal of the group has to take into account both the gruesome activities it is involved in, its characteristics as a religious group, and the way in which it describes itself. Though Pye initially shows no hesitation in declaring that Aum Shinrikyō is religion (1996: 262), a little further in the article he seems to suggest by corollary that it might be bad religion:

“...it is not justified on the basis of one case to conclude that ‘religion’ is ‘bad’.” (: 263).

If Pye’s article is an apologia for religion in the midst of Japanese national panic about violent anti-social/anti-world activities by religious groups, then it is a very subtle one, and one picks up only with difficulty some kind of embarrassment on Pye’s part for Studies in Religion.

While the academic study of religion does not itself involve condemning acts of murder, it can hardly be taken amiss if a person who is professionally engaged in the academic study of religion expresses horror or dismay at such acts, especially when they are committed within the range of phenomena or events covered by his or her research. (Pye, 1996: 263)

When scholars do this, Pye implies that they are crossing the boundary of their immediate discipline and perhaps moving from an operational definition of religion which is “non-evaluative” (and the proper arena for the historical and comparative study of religion as a shared science), to adopt some sort of normative view which can evaluate what religion is “really” - and from this point of view Aum Shinrikyō might be considered something like a religion, but not a “real” one (: 262-3). Pye never says it outright, but one is left with the impression that he is in agreement, both by his statement that he deplors the acts of terrorism and murder (: 263) and by his judgment that the Dalai Lama is either a “knave or a fool” for having supported Asahara Shōkō (: 268) and that this kind of criticism is necessary for participation in informed public discussion, rather than the narrow field of academic work.

Pye concludes his article: “Because of the dramatic criminal acts in which members of Aum Shinrikyō have been implicated, the case enables the distinction between the independent study of religions and the occasional need for the adoption of a critical stance to be clarified easily. Both are thereby enabled, while the independence and the integrity of the academic study of religions is not compromised.” (: 270).

It is clear that Pye feels himself somehow discredited by the activities of Aum Shinrikyō and that he also feels himself somehow constrained by trying to be a good scholar of religion so that he cannot really criticise the activities of Aum Shinrikyō unless he steps out from the academy. I spoke on a related topic last year in the presidential address (Franzmann, 1996) and will not go into this further except to express amazement that Pye should think of himself as so constrained by his discipline, that he cannot criticise the activities of Aum Shinrikyō from within the discipline.

While most of us don’t like to think that we are overly conservative in our offerings for Studies in Religion programs (at least from the point of view of the Australian public or even the university community at large), nevertheless I would suggest that many of us are concerned in our programs principally with the “orthodox”

expressions of established religion, for whatever conscious or unconscious reasons. It is with phenomena like Heaven's Gate and Aum Shinrikyō that we come unstuck.

The penchant to study "real" or "orthodox" religion has another limitation, apart from the attitude to mad or bad "fringe" religions. The established religions have their own view of themselves, as does the history of textbook writing and academic writing on them, and I would suggest that both streams offer a very limited view of membership in the established religions. My third category of investigation is "invisibility" and this category relates to the selectivity apparent in our texts and lecture/seminar content about what constitutes religion - "real" religion.

As I set out on study leave at the beginning of this year, my research assistant handed over piles of material collected to assist me in the writing of a textbook on Women and Religion. In doing so she commented on her reading while collecting the material, and suggested that after the book was written, the Studies in Religion textbooks would need to be rewritten; that there was a whole other religion out there that hadn't been taken into account. I thought at the time that this was an exaggerated claim, but I have revised that opinion as I have become more engrossed in the research. *There is a whole other religion out there*, and when documented by those believers authorised to do so (mostly clerics/male religious professionals) and by academics, it is usually categorised as marginally related to the "real" religion of which it is a part, be that Hinduism or Islam or Judaism... Within these religions, although the (male) professionals may claim the right to determine the tradition, very often the women develop a complementary tradition of their own. As Higgins (1985: 479) states with specific reference to Islam in Iran:

Too often discussions of the role of women in Iran (or in any society other than our own) address only women's official rights and duties and ignore their actual patterns of behaviour.

I would add that too often the official texts and official lines of interpretation in these established religions speak of women only in negative terms, in taboo, what they may not do. Their actual religious tradition, developed despite this, is very often not visible since it is not officially acknowledged. Even where the ritual has become acknowledged in academic circles, they continue to be labelled often as marginal. Are academic scholars so influenced by the labelling by (mostly) male professionals of women's religious life?

Let me give just two examples from Islam concerning women's "marginal" religious life and the way in which it is categorised as un-Islamic - so not even "real" religion.

Julie Marcus (1992) deals with pilgrimages (*ziyaret*) by Moslem women to small village shrines and larger city shrines (the shrines are overwhelmingly visited by women), often considered "un-Islamic" by clerics.<sup>4</sup> She writes in particular of the shrine tomb of Susuz Dede in Izmir and concludes:

At first sight, the rites carried out at Susuz Dede are very simple, a first impression which is quite misleading. It is important to recognise that the classifying of women's rites as 'simple', 'crude' or 'primitive' is essential to being able to define them as superstitious and un-Islamic. The easy dismissal of women's rites as superstition is crucial to maintaining a set of gender relations in which women are subordinate, and denies that women's rites are, in reality, deeply integrated within Turkish culture and Islam. (: 132).

Marcus sees much of the difficulty and categorising to lie in the women's seeking to participate actively in Islam, but without the control of the clergy (: 139).<sup>5</sup> This first example is rather simple, referring to rites that are widespread in the Islamic world of women and their interpretation principally by the (male) clergy. My second example delves deeper into the complexity of social life and the economic and political forces aligned with religious forces that contrive to keep women invisible and/or labelled as irreligious.

Victoria Bernal(1994) has traced recently the development of a fundamentalist/text-based understanding of Islam in a Sudanese village, Wad al Abbas, showing how the new understanding of what constitutes Islam is influenced by and mediated by economic and political considerations, especially in relation to Saudi Arabia, and by the tie which ensues in the people's minds between fundamentalism and the "good life". While the village men's lives and their knowledge and experience of the outside world have changed dramatically with the new economic order, women's lives have been more and more limited to the domestic sphere, and they have become more restricted by the imposition of new forms of seclusion and modesty (: 45-7). While the women are thus the ones who retain continuity with how the world was before the new order, unfortunately for them, the link with past tradition which was previously seen as positive, is judged now to be "backward", "ignorant", and "irreligious" (: 50). The new regime and economic success is what constitutes Islam. What is interesting in this situation is that, because many men are away from the village on a routine basis (especially as migrant workers in Saudi Arabia), women have come to control many ceremonies and rites of passage, with the exception of the infrequent "major life crisis rituals" and the Friday mosque attendance (: 58). While it appears then that women actually control a good deal of the religious life of the village and that their religious life should not be considered fringe in this context, I would almost guarantee that if my students took their model of Islam from the information in their set textbook or any other similar current textbook on world religions, they would only recognise the mosque and the major male-controlled rituals as of interest to a study of Islam in that village. I wonder how many scholars of religion would do the same. The women's religious life might as well be invisible.

Of course I don't want to suggest that it is only women who are/have been invisible within established religions - the same holds true for a number of groups of members - but the women are by far the most sizeable group.

In this paper I have tried to present three situations in which I think Studies in

Religion scholars have not been coping or have not been bothering to be involved - where religion is mad, bad or invisible. I think the first and second categories have a particular difficulty all their own. Part of the problem is that some scholars, like Pye, feel the need to defend religion as something meaningful (and therefore not insane or bad). Those who studied the texts of Heaven's Gate<sup>6</sup> couldn't help but be impressed by the very close ties in a number of areas between their concept and ancient Gnostic systems of belief, especially the Manichaeans who believed in ships of light in the heavens (moon and sun) to ferry the souls of the dead into the land of Light and believed also in gates in the heavens through which the souls must pass on their odyssey. Perhaps there are those who are convinced that the Gnostics themselves were mad in their time too. But if Heaven's Gate and the Manichaeans seem mad for their cosmological belief in a extra-terrestrial vehicle to ferry souls to the heavenly region, we have only to consider that many orthodox Christians still believe in a Jesus who ascended to heaven bodily and was lost to sight with two extra-terrestrial angels as he passed into the clouds, and many Muslims believe that Muhammed made a heavenly journey by horse. Why are these stories from Christianity and Islam treated seriously and the others not?

Within the academy, perhaps scholars like Pye feel themselves to be discredited by the behaviour of groups like Aum Shinrikyō, but why should this be so? Do zoologists feel discredited by reports of shark attacks on humans; do the entomologists feel denigrated by the general public perception of the value of mosquitos? Why should we consider that bad experiences by the public of the behaviour of religious groups should in any way affect our own cause or necessitate an apology for "good" religion? Perhaps one answer is that we are still too strongly perceived, and perhaps even subconsciously perceive ourselves as being involved in the theological enterprise, despite our best efforts to disassociate ourselves and to educate the university community and the public to the difference between religion and Studies in Religion.

Confusing religion with Studies in Religion happens all the time, even with scholars of religion. As Lease (1995a) points out in his foreword to a special issue on Pathologies in the Academic Study of Religion in the journal *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, two phenomena are usually to blame, at least in the North American context - the origin of Studies in Religion in theological faculties so that it ends up sharing some of theology's identity; and programs which have as one of their goals the enhancement of personal faith or the fostering of religious experience. Lease's own experience at Santa Cruz was of a Board which effectively decimated a successful and broad program of Studies in Religion at one stroke by rationalising to provide only "strengths" in Christian, Indic and Judaic traditions, in which students were also personally involved for the most part - thus expressing its goal of being concerned with individual students' own religious traditions (1995b: 315). While several key players in the demise were held responsible, Lease remarks that in the end in his view the program at Santa Cruz committed suicide (: 320).

In the same *MTSR* issue there are other stories that are not exactly similar but

which have a similar moral. Donald Wiebe's (1995) paper describes the difficulty of both the undergraduate and graduate Studies in Religion program at Toronto in freeing itself from "Christian (theological) domination". Within the section on graduate studies, Wiebe cites the second major decision that threatened the future existence of the program as "the university's willingness to consider the establishment of a Graduate Department of Theology" (: 367). In the one article in the issue from a "successful" department (at Arizona State University), it is still noted that one of the major continuing difficulties in maintaining the success of the department is the misperception, even by students and other faculty members, that Studies in Religion is driven by a ministerial or spiritual agenda (Cady, 1995). And this occurs even where that department deals with all major world religions and has never made an appointment in biblical studies on principle, because such an appointment has always been at the core - a "premier icon" - of divinity school programs (: 397).

The difficulty with theology and religion is perhaps an American tendency more than here in Australia, but we may begin to face similar difficulties with the present turn around, with some university departments negotiating links with theological colleges in the area of postgraduate studies. I would not say that Studies in Religion in Australia is in danger of being swamped by studies in Christianity and in Christian theology, but I do think we must be careful of the development of university interest in theology as a possible new direction, even if only within postgraduate programs, and how we are perceived by others within and outside the academy as this happens.

"Fringe" religions and Studies in Religion - Is it just that there are too many to keep track of? Or are we not inclined to consider them for other reasons? Who decides what constitutes the "fringe"? Who decides what is "real" religion? Do women's voices count at all? Who decides what kind of Buddhism or Hinduism or Islam or Christianity or Judaism we teach? Do these religions as described in our textbooks actually exist?

Why didn't the media talk more to scholars of religion when the Heaven's Gate incident hit the news? Why are we ill-informed about, or perhaps simply disinterested in, the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of small religious groups popping up in cyberspace? Why does Michael Pye feel that he can't decry the use of violence by Aum Shinrikyō from his position within Studies in Religion? Why is women's religious experience still something mostly "marginal" and optional to our study (and often one of the first subjects to be sacrificed when economic difficulties arise for departments)? Why do so many women now prefer to talk about their "spirituality", rather than "religion" as if, not having been allowed previously to claim the word or the experience, they want no part of it now?

In conclusion, I simply want to make a plea for a greater breadth and openness within our present programs, and for care in the way in which we view and present what until now might have been labelled as "fringe" religious experience.

## Notes

1. <http://www5.zdnet.com/yil/higher/heavensgate/>
2. A press conference transcript by Alan Hale in the HB ( i.e. Hale-Bopp) magazine on line (<http://www.halebopp.com/zhalestatement.htm>), covers much the same area of concern, trying to convince people to see the comet from a scientific point of view, rather than in ignorance or superstition.
3. In the case of the Waco incident the boundaries might be a little smudged, with this group reacting to provocation with violence that resulted in damage to themselves.
4. see also Tapper, N. 1990. "Ziyaret: gender, movement, and exchange in a Turkish community". In Eickelman, Dale F. and James Piscatori (Eds.), *Muslim Travellers: Pilgrimage, Migration, and the Religious Imagination*. London: Routledge, 236–55, esp. 237.
5. see also Mernissi, F. (1988). *Doing Daily Battle: Interviews with Moroccan Women*. London: The Women's Press, 126.
6. For a brief introductory summary, see esp. <http://www5.zdnet.com/yil/higher/heavensgate/dosintro.html>

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