

THE OBSERVER

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■ AND IN THIS CORNER . . .

Comets and cults: nothing new under the sun

Comets have throughout the course of Western civilization been considered in the Christian mind as harbingers of doom. The most famous comet in history, Halley's Comet, has been linked in particular to comet sightings in 70 A.D., supposedly prophesying the destruction of Jerusalem, and in 1066 A.D., which William the Conqueror unscrupulously

"cult" always carried negative overtones, and often leads those in the accepted religions to consider cult members odd, extremist, or simply insane. Historically, all Christian societies have sheltered remnants of previous belief systems, whose adherents sometimes worshiped secretly, sometimes openly, always persecuted.

The worship of the goddess Artemis or Diana in ancient Mediterranean civilization remained prevalent until the advent of Christianity, after which the goddess worship is referred to as the Cult of Diana. Many historians and anthropologists see connections between the Cult of Diana and various forms of Mother Goddess or witchcraft belief. Outside the Mediterranean world in other parts of the world affected by Christianity, the ancient Irish claimed as their highest power the god Lugh, the light-bringer of the sun, the Scandinavian and Germanic tribes believed in Wotan or Odin, and various tribes of the Native Americans of Central America worshiped gods of the sun and sky in various animal forms, all beliefs now relegated to the status of myth or transformed into saintly cults by Roman Catholicism.

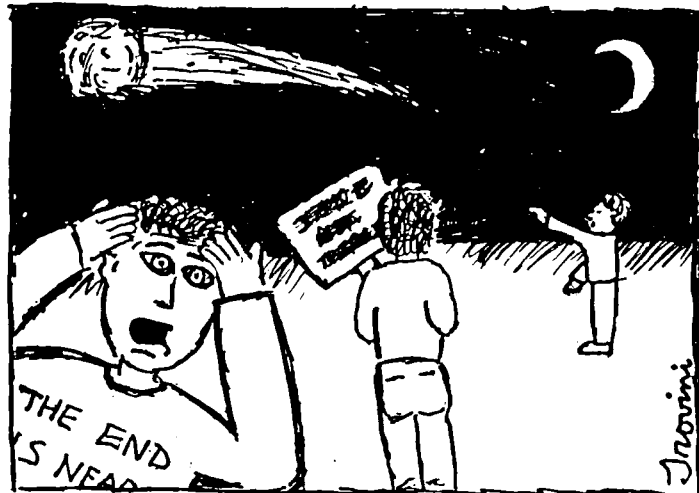
But have religious cults become associated with ritualistic death by suicide solely because of 20th century media? Even the tendency of cults towards apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic fervor is not new, not even in American history. Several groups of the later half of the 19th century's "Great Awakening" predicted the end of the world on specific days, even changing the date twice when their predictions failed to come true. Time seems to have a great deal to do with the cult belief, the sense of change as promulgated by humanity's concept of time that creates this irrational fervor or need to transcend the mundane. Apocalyptic views of the world aren't relegated solely to cults, however; Christianity itself contains the concept of the Second Coming, the Jewish tradition of Messianism.

The cyclical renewal observed in natural phenomenon which is traditionally the basis for pagan cults and the concept of

the Christian Resurrection are not connected by coincidence. Until the days of the Emperor Constantine in the 4th century A.D., Christianity's early history, as celebrated and "Hollywoodized" in fictional depictions of the Rome of Nero, was as a religion under persecution. Persecution came to an end not because Constantine became Christian, but because of his Edict of Milan, passed in 313, which forbade persecution of any forms of monotheism. Constantine himself was not baptized a Christian until he lay on his deathbed; throughout his life, he reigned as the head priest of the state religion of Sol Invictus, "the Invincible Sun," and in the interests of unifying the various factions of his kingdom, Constantine deliberately blurred the differences between the three most popular monotheistic religions of Mithraism, Sol Invictus and Christianity.

In fact, it was at the Council of Nicaea in 325, presided over by Constantine, that the Church fathers declared the divinity of the man known as Jesus, named Yeshua, or Joshua, in the Greek, deciding the specific nature of his divinity by a vote. Constantine was acknowledged as the new Messiah, and upon the monarch's death, forged papers were produced which gave Christianity the status of official state religion and the right to anoint kings. Starting with the incorporation of the pagan religions of the Near East, up through the assimilation of the various pagan beliefs and iconography of Northern and Western Europe, Christianity today resembles more the pagan cults than it does its base in Judaism.

But Christianity is called a religion, not a mythology, and not a cult, because as a



system of beliefs even its various sects have essentially the same basic orthodoxy, that of the Resurrection. Why, then, is the majority of the Western World fascinated and repelled by the seemingly irrational beliefs of what we call cults? Beliefs in UFOs, charismatic leaders who claim to be Christ, beliefs in the apocalypse, whether by divine or natural forces, if there is a difference, should come as no surprise to a devout Christian. A surface reading of Christian scripture reveals all manner of irrational images, including the most oft-quoted book of the Bible, Revelations. Unless one interprets Christian readings strictly symbolically, there seems no reason at all to believe what is written.

A few weeks ago in a Time poll of approximately 1,000 Americans, over 80 percent of the respondents professed a belief in Heaven as a physical place, and about half believed Jesus physically died and returned from the grave. How different is that from the belief that an extraterrestrial object, hiding behind a natural object, will spirit away the souls of believers to an otherworldly paradise?

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Matthew Apple

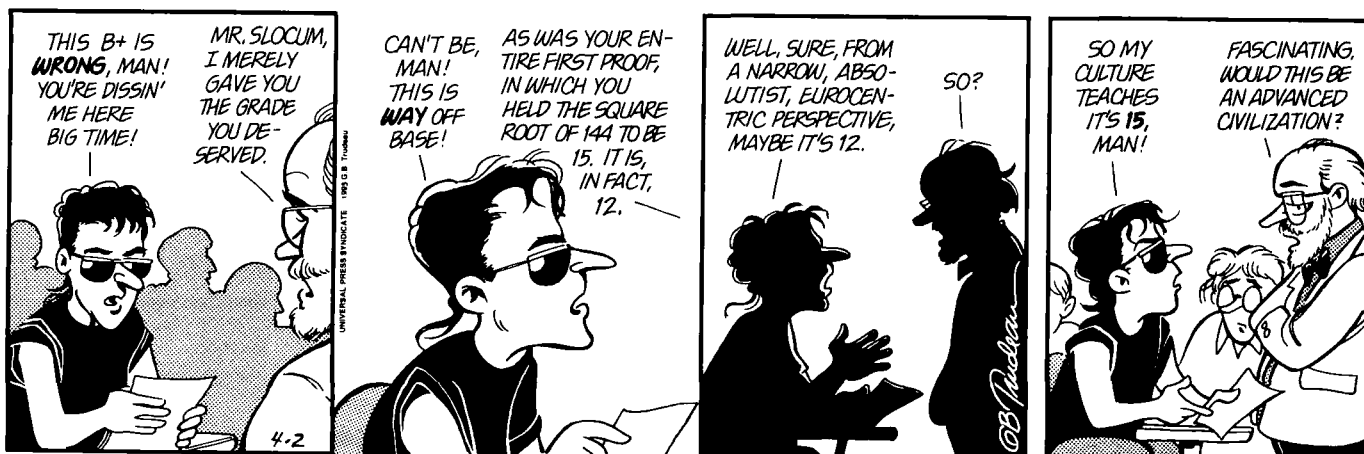
used to predict his victory at the Battle of Hastings. The widespread panic in response to Halley's unusually bright appearance in the first half of the 20th century was the impetus for H.G. Wells' book "In the Days of the Comet" and the source of Mark Twain's deathbed remark that as he had come with the comet, so would he go.

Hale-Bopp's appearance in the northwestern American sky has brought its share of self-fulfilling disaster in the past month, instigating the third mass suicide of members of the international Solar Temple cult, this time in Quebec, and now linked with the celebrated deaths of the 39 members of the Higher Source group. The mass suicide in San Diego has spawned endless television and internet coverage and renewed interest in millennialism and cult death, as we all lean forward on the edge of our sofas to take in the morbid details. Cults abound throughout the United States and the rest of the world, but they receive little attention until death attracts the media hounds.

Cults are, of course, nothing new. Webster's defines a "cult" as any group which follows religious rituals that are not accepted by the orthodoxy; thus the word

■ DOONESBURY

GARRY TRUDEAU



■ QUOTE OF THE DAY

"To his dog, every man is Napoleon; hence, the constant popularity of dogs."

—Anonymous