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The Perils of Alienation

By **Hiram Crespo**, editor.

*Religion then becomes the practice of alienation par excellence: it supposes the rupture of man with himself and the creation of an imaginary world in which truth is invested upon the imaginary. Theology, affirms Feuerbach, is a psychological pathology. – Michel Onfray's *Traité d'Athéologie**

I recently watched a documentary [on the Heavens Gate cult](#), which concluded in the peaceful, even glad, suicide of 38 cult members during March of 1997. Cult members made frequent references to “the next evolutionary kingdom above human” and made it clear that they firmly rejected their humanity, their bodily identity, their Earth identity. The goal of life, they believed, was to become post-human.

Literally believing themselves to be working towards becoming asexual alien-like beings, cult members exhibited a severe hatred for the body which, like that of Paul of Tarsus, culminated in a strict ascetic lifestyle with its many attached neuroses.

In addition to the non-physical forms of self-mutilation (the denial of libido, the severance of normal family and social ties, etc.) several of the males who committed suicide were also found to be castrated. Their asceticism led them to idealize a non-gendered state, not too different from what monks in many traditions aspire to attain, or from Catholic priests who wear female-like robes and aspire for an unnatural, asexual, angel-like ideal.

They wanted to be anything but the sexual beings that we all are, to escape the accusation that they were animals, an accusation which was entirely accurate. Mammals, in fact.

I mention the parallels with the Catholic cult in specific because, in addition to its central symbol being a bloody scene of human sacrifice on a cross, it has a long and well-documented history of sadistic practices based on that very idea of sacrificing our humanity. When libido is denied it becomes distorted and at times results in sexual activity with minors, or in mutilation of the self or the other. During the medieval days when Christian ascetic hysteria was allowed to run rampant, sexual torture of women accused of witchcraft included the mutilation of women's breasts, and the sexual and non-sexual acts of torture carried out by the Holy Inquisition involved awful acts such as removal of the eyes (as per the Gospels, where Jesus orders his followers to cut their eye off if it leads to sinning).

Because such acts are now illegal, many priests and monks now resort to more private expressions of their sadism like the *mortification of the flesh* practices in Catholicism, in which the body is punished in order, supposedly, to strengthen one's will (because "the flesh is weak"). It's a much more common practice than most people realize. Pope John Paul II, we learned after his death, practiced self-flagellation.

Mortification means "to make (-ficare) die (morti-)". The idea of this form of ascetic sadism is "make the flesh die". It becomes clear that these practices of self-mutilation, castration, suicide, and other forms of radical denial of the body and the bodily identity, only make sense within the context of a death cult that idealizes non-life, non-physicality.

I find it dangerous that many secularists spend so much time accurately calling the death-cults by their proper name, but focus so much on the Abrahamic religious problem that they fail to recognize the other immaterialisms, the more New-Agey and seemingly innocent ones like the Heaven's Gate cult that took 38 lives in 1997.

The adherents of the cult felt that they were not as credulous as the common Christian because, to them, angels were aliens ... and everyone knew aliens existed. It was aliens, not angels, who artificially inseminated the Virgin Mary. It was aliens who appeared to Jesus at Gethsemani. As we enter deeper into a scientific age, aliens in a cult can easily replace angels and gods. In fact, according to official Mormon doctrine, the God of the Mormons is an human-like alien that lives on planet Kolob with his multiple wives.

And so it's important to recognize that not all the death cults fall strictly within traditional Abrahamic religiosity. The Heaven's Gate practice of alienation, literally, sought to make aliens of humans and was as radical a negation of our humanity, as radical a practice and a program of de-humanization, as the Christian monastic attempts to become an asexual angel. Hatred of the body, of the natural self, of the human animal, permeates these traditions.

The Death Cult in its Most Naked Form



"Fear was the first thing on Earth to create gods." — Lucretius

It's understandable, in cultures where life here on Earth becomes unbearable, that people will want to transcend life and alienate themselves from their physical, inescapable reality. But, in addition to the physical dangers of alienation, there is also a psychological and social toll.

In recent years, the cult of Santísima Muerte (Most Holy Death) has taken over Mexican culture so completely that even the most mainstream-appearing Mexicans are ready to defend the practices and beliefs of the cult, which is (many believe falsely) attributed to the indigenous beliefs of the pre-colonial past.

With copious depictions of what looks like either the Grim Reaper or He-Man's Skeletor in drag, the cult of Holy Death is not just for celebrants of Halloween. It is the most visible cult in Mexico. Gang members have oftentimes

committed ritual killings in her honor. The drug war in Mexico, according to some estimates, has taken over 70,000 lives in recent years and made the country virtually impossible to govern.

Ultimately, the worship of death is a recognition that we are all the mercy of our mortality, that we will all be reaped. Many people involved in the cult try to bargain with Death, in this way negotiating the frail balance between their constant fears and the need to leave the house daily and have normalcy. Perhaps the cult of death comes naturally to a people accustomed to daily killings, to seeing death everywhere. But why should it follow that we should surrender to the impulse of death instead of the impulse of life, merely because she stalks us and haunts us persistently?

A detailed comparative evaluation of the Santisima Muerte cult in Mexico versus the kindred Hindu cult to Mother Kali is beyond the scope of this article, but let's just say that, while Kali is like a jealous lioness protecting her cubs, Santisima Muerte appears to be a much less tender Mother in Mexican culture.

What must be said here is that there is no need to worship death or be fascinated by it. Instead, we should take the tonic of the second cure that Philodemus gave us: "There is no-thing to fear in death", and see her for what she is. Non-being. She is not there. There is nothing, no-thing to fear literally.

Grounded as natural beings

But there must be another cure in addition to taking refuge in Epicurean doctrine. This, I believe, is the cure of what I like to call **groundedness**: to confidently stand within our physicality, within our humanity and our nature. To be and to want to be what we are, no more, no less: mortals, Earthlings, humans.

That we are animals, mammals, one species of hominids descended from the great apes, is not a source of shame or of pride, it is simply a given. We are beings of nature.

This is why, prior to the study of Ethics, Epicurus advised the study of the Canon and of PHYSICS: a good foundation of understanding about the nature of things is needed in order to live a good life. The science of ethics can only be grasped **after** we understand Physics. All true philosophy must be based on the study of nature. We DO NOT believe that it's healthy for people to have to choose between science and spirituality: the only acceptable form of spirituality must have a firm scientific base.

Viewed against the backdrop of these cults and the forces that create them, our animality and naturality should perhaps be even seen as having some redeeming value. Even if we live stressfully, it's true that the fight-or-flight instinct saves lives. Even if we have strong body odor, it's true that sweating saves us from overheating. And if we hate excreting waste daily, we should only try to imagine what would happen to us if all the toxicity stayed in our bodies instead of being released. Whatever we hate in our nature is the fruit of countless generations of natural selection and exists for a reason. In the end, it's always best that we are natural beings.

Natural selection is the true way in which we're chosen. Religious people have unnatural beliefs about chosenness: the main argument against those beliefs is that a vast number, if not the majority, of the Jewish people are actually atheists. In what way does it matter that some believe Jews to be God's chosen, if most of them have chosen not to believe in God? Humans bear the burden of freedom and can not be chosen in this manner. But natural selection has always allowed the best adapted members of a group to pass on their traits and knowledge. It's not difficult to understand how gifted and blessed we are as natural beings, perfectly suited for our habitat and our planet. This is how the third cure given by Philodemus can be easily grasped: the things we truly need are easy to procure because we emerged as beings suited just to procure those things.

If, without denying our mortality, we develop a fully indifferent attitude towards the alienating forces, no matter how omnipresent Death may seem, we can then easily focus on life and remain imperturbable in the processes of living, of caring for each other, of exercising, of eating, and all of our other natural activities.

I remember that when I took martial arts classes, I felt like I was at the top of the world after my trainings. It was an amazing mood-booster to find myself happily in my body, to see how it has the wisdom to produce ecstasy not just through the erotic or ascetic arts of reaching an orgasm or doing yoga, but also through dancing, exercising and singing. The body can be an ally in our liberation. We can be free AS the body, never needing to find ourselves outside of it.

There are fair warnings both in life and in all the wisdom traditions against the dangers of being embodied as human, but these should not lead us to cowardly escape. There is nothing wrong with dreaming of freedom, but this freedom has only one healthy outlet: as an Earthling, as a natural being, as a human, starting from where we are.