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## The Second Wave of Jonestown Literature: A Review Essay

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The decennial of Jonestown was commemorated with austere warnings about "cults" always lurking and waiting to work their evil among us. Perhaps it is ironic that the actual date of Jonestown, November 18, should be so close to American Thanksgiving, which commemorates the exploits of another deviant religious group which fled persecution into the wilderness. "Rather than an anomalous aberration, Jonestown could appear as a recent instance of a religiopolitical utopianism that was integral to the original colonization of America and that has surfaced periodically throughout American history," comments David Chidester (1988:165).

The ten-year anniversary also saw the publication of personal accounts and political analyses of the tragedy, including Rebecca Moore's *The Jonestown Letters*, the correspondence of two sisters who died at Jonestown with their parents (Moore, 1987), her volume of essays entitled *In Defense of Peoples Temple* which examines the response of the government, the media and the opponents of Jim Jones to the Jonestown community (Moore, 1988), and a monograph in the CIA conspiracy genre (Meiers, 1988).

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(Ed. note: This essay was originally combined with "The Historical Antecedents of Jonestown: The Sociology of Martyrdom," printed elsewhere in this volume, and represents a substantial expansion of an earlier version, "Reconsidering Jonestown" published in *Religious Studies Review*.)

The focus of the present paper will be primarily on two recent sociological works on the Peoples Temple. *Salvation and Suicide* (Chidester, 1988) and *Gone From the Promised Land* (Hall, 1987) are both highly provocative monographs. Their treatment of the Peoples Temple movement and its tragedy is more comprehensive, particularly John Hall's volume, and more attuned to theoretical issues in social science, particularly David Chidester's monograph, than are earlier works by social scientists. Both works also make a significant contribution in terms of their sensitivity to the historical or comparative-generic aspect of any attempt to understand the Jonestown catastrophe, i.e., they are attuned to the significance of meaningful comparisons which might be made between Jonestown and other collective suicide events in history. We will be somewhat concerned with this dimension in this essay, and we will venture our own comparison of Jonestown with two earlier episodes in a separate essay in this volume.

Before turning to these two very recent monographs, the following is a brief commentary on earlier studies of the Peoples Temple and the Jonestown tragedy.

### The "First Wave"

"In our culture we have not done well in coming to terms with the cultural legacy of Jonestown," comments John Hall in *Gone From the Promised Land* (1987:303). Surprisingly, rather little sociological and social science analysis of the ill-fated Peoples Temple was published in the first seven or eight years after the spectacular cataclysm. The present writer lacks familiarity with the theological and religious studies evaluations of Jonestown (e.g., Rose, 1979; Smith, 1982), or with the full corpus of psychiatric and psychological analyses and clinical studies directly pertinent to the Peoples Temple (e.g., Kroth, 1984; Lasaga, 1980; Lifton, 1979; Ulman and Abse, 1983). Nevertheless, by the mid-1980s, notwithstanding hundreds of articles, papers and monographs on "new religious movements" and "cults",<sup>1</sup> sociologists and scientific students of religion had produced only one short monograph (Weightman, 1983), a reader (Levi, 1982) and a handful of articles dealing specifically with the Peoples Temple and its spectacular holocaust. These works might be termed the *first wave* of Jonestown studies. It appears now, a decade after the terrible event at Jonestown, a *second*

*wave* of research and reevaluation is now breaking. Among the second wave of Jonestown works are the two monographs to be discussed in this paper.

A seminal article by John Hall (1981) developed an incisive analysis which is extrapolated in the final chapter of his monograph, and which focused on the ambiguity of Jim Jones' movement in which the political revolutionary ("warring sect") and religious ("other-worldly sect") dimensions of the movement partly cancelled each other out and undercut the movement's accommodation to intractable reality. An unpublished paper by Chidester (1983) presented a general phenomenological theory of collective religious suicide, which entails responses to subhuman/superhuman classifications of persons and groups. This interpretation is amplified and extended in his new volume

A third outstanding analysis was formulated by Johnson (1979), who delineated the working out of "dilemmas of charisma" in the last few years of the Peoples Temple. Jones' responses to a number of developments which potentially undercut his charismatic authority created new difficulties such that the Temple became locked into a spiraling process of intensifying authoritarian control and paranoid boundary-maintenance. Lifton (1979) also focused on the destabilizing effects of an institutionally unfettered interaction between an adulated guru-prophet and his worshipful devotees. More recently, Wallis (1984:103-118) discussed the Temple and several other movements such as Synanon and the Children of God in terms of the "precariousness of charisma" and its implications for the intensification over time of a group's volatility and potential for violence (see also Melton, 1985 and Wallis and Bruce, 1986:115-128).

Since 1978 a hortatory literature which sees the Jonestown tragedy as an object lesson on the threats of mind control in cults has flourished (e.g., Yanoff, 1984). Nevertheless, an analysis by Richardson (1980) highlights a number of key differences between the Temple and other controversial cults in terms of organizational structure, ideology, patterns of resocialization, general worldview, and ritual behavior. Yet Jones' movement was similar to many other contemporary movements in terms of an organizational totalism which consumed participants in a "perverse utopia" (Coser and Coser, 1979). Wooden (1981) delineates the financial exploitation and treatment of children by the Temple and concludes his volume with attacks on cultist "brainwashing" and the financial non-accountability of churches. But the vast majority of communal, authoritarian, charismatically led, world-rejecting and puta-

tively mind-controlling cults do not produce spectacular mass suicides. What was special about the Peoples Temple?

John Hall's explicit theory (1981, 1987) on this score is discussed below; however, the earlier version of his analysis of the Peoples Temple (1981) has been applied by Robbins (1986) to mass suicides among the Old Believers in 17th century Russia (see also Chidester, 1983 and my paper, "The Historical Antecedents of Jonestown" in this volume), although the degree of persecution was certainly greater in Tsarist Russia. In her useful monograph, Weightman (1983) argues that the Peoples Temple might be viewed as two movements: a white middle class "new religion," and a largely black lower-class "cult." A socially idealistic elite dominated a less educated rank and file concerned primarily with personal and physical healing. Weightman criticizes the application of brainwashing constructs and is also critical of the journalistic account of Naipaul (1981), whose provocative interpretation of the evolution of Jones' movement highlights the fragmentation of American culture and the flourishing in the 1970s of various apocalyptic and mystical countercultures which interacted explosively in the countercultural melting pot of California. Finally, the popular, media and intellectual response to Jonestown has received significant scholarly attention (Jorgensen, 1980; Lindt, 1981; Shupe and Bromley, 1980:207-247).<sup>2</sup> The media review by Lindt (1981-2) is particularly valuable.

With the exception of the unpublished conference paper by Chidester (1983), an interesting quality of first wave social science work on Jonestown is its absence of a comparative-historical dimension. Possible historical counterparts of Jonestown such as the Jewish suicides at Masada or the mass immolations among Russian Old Believers were occasionally mentioned in media stories on Jonestown, but notwithstanding a few comments on Masada (Hauerwas, 1982; Mills, 1982), scholars generally do not appear to have followed these leads up with comparative investigations prior to the unpublished general theory of religious suicide presented at a conference by Chidester (1983) and the later exploratory comparative analysis of the Peoples Temple and the Old Believers by the present writer (1986). Yet the rather obvious comparison with the Old Believers was noted quite early not only by the occasional journalist but also by Soviet poet Andrei Voznesensky, in his poem "Guyana," which appeared in the *New York Times* on December 3, 1978 (translated by W. J. Smith). The third verse reads:

Not hippies, not a group-sex cult,  
I see rise from the jungle dirt  
The flame of Russia's Old Believers  
destroying themselves in a wooden church.

Both Hall (1987) and Chidester (1988) incorporate a much deeper acknowledgement of Jonestown's place in history. Indeed, the tradition of mass religious suicide in Christian culture is so pervasive as to merit a separate discussion altogether; the perspectives of both Chidester and Hall are included in "The Historical Antecedents of Jonestown," elsewhere in this volume.

### **Exorcism: Distancing America From Jonestown**

At the outset of this paper we quoted Chidester (1988:165) to the effect that the Peoples Temple and Jonestown might be viewed as an instance of a communal religiopolitical utopianism which is endemic to American history and has been a vital force in the colonization, settlement and expansion of the United States (see also FitzGerald, 1986). Nevertheless, the immediate reaction to the Jonestown tragedy amounted to a kind of exorcism, an identification of Jonestown as fundamentally other, an aberration basically foreign to American traditions. Jonestown was widely seen to reflect some combination of jungle fever in the Heart Of Darkness with godless Marxism and the arcane psychopathology of "destructive cultism."

Popular, media, and intellectual reactions to Jonestown represent vital concerns to both Hall and Chidester in their respective monographs. Hall notes that the tragedy in Guyana was widely interpreted as being intrinsic to the nature of a demonic cult and thus fundamentally alien to the American way of life. The terrible holocaust could not from this standpoint "be understood as a more complex product of the struggles between the Peoples Temple and its opponents" (Hall, 1987:308). Using Durkheimian concepts, Hall posits the compulsive construction of a mythic antimony of the "positive cult" or idealized conception of American society and the "negative cult or cancerous evil of the Peoples Temple — a group that cut itself off by migration, murder, and mass suicide" (Hall, 1987:308). In the aftermath of a disaster "ideological procedures of interpretation" arise which reflect the self-interests of various involved parties, and also "realize a basic capacity of religion...the reaffirmation of the sanctity of a social order (1987:308).

A rather more elaborate analysis of the phenomenology of the cultural response to Jonestown is presented by Chidester, who explores three modes of cognitive distancing whereby the absolute otherness of Jonestown to ourselves and our culture and society is insistently stressed.

(1) By means of psychological distancing, the Peoples Temple participants are dehumanized through the applications of psycho-medical and popular conceptions of mental illness, brainwashing, "cult madness," etc. Integral to psychological distancing is the "argument that conversion to and participation in an alternative religious movement can only be accounted for in terms of brainwashing, mind control, or coercive mental persuasion" (Chidester, 1988:29). Perceived now as subhuman, diseased, and totally helpless and manipulated, the actions of these putatively unfree agents may now appear less serious a threat to the society whose behavioral expectations their actions had so vividly overthrown. Cognitive distancing thus "served to reinforce the boundaries of normality that would be threatened by acknowledging the event of Jonestown as the result of conscious decisions made by fully human beings" (Chidester, 1988:31). The horrendous events of November 18, 1978 dramatically contravened normal expectations but the resulting dissonance "was muted through such strategies of psychological distancing that sought to remove the event of Jonestown from the region of daily human behavior" (Chidester, 1988:31). The otherness of Jonestown was mediated by strategies through which Jones et al. were depicted as "less than human and, therefore, less threatening to the large human community" (1988:31).

(2) A second mode of cognitive distancing — political distancing — was employed by State Department bureaucrats, Guyanese authorities, American socialists, and liberal San Francisco politicians (who had been allied with Jim Jones) to disclaim any responsibility for the events leading to the tragedy, for the prior growth of the Temple, or for any possible similarity of Jones' movement to their beliefs and activities. Lessons were drawn not only about the menace of cults, but also regarding the dangers of socialism — Jonestown embodied "socialism at work" (Novak, 1979) — and Marxist totalitarian slavery; while on the left the differences between Jones' dispensation and legitimate, authentic socialism were emphasized (Moberg, 1978). "Little concern was raised in the [U.S.] political arena about what the life and death of the Peoples Temple might *reveal* about America" (1988:22). Such considerations

were indeed voiced by Soviet and Guyanese commentators, the former associating the Jonestown horror with *capitalism*, and the latter denying that it was *their* problem, i.e., it reflected alienation and depravity in the United States, although some U.S. observers seemed to feel that the dark jungle of Guyana was an essential input. The present writer is reminded in this connection of one sociologist's view that new religions tend to become "spiritual inkblots; reports of movements may tell us more about the observer than about the observed" (Stone, 1978:142).

(3) Finally, religious distancing allowed the Disciples of Christ denomination — which had originally ordained Jones and supported his ministry — other Christian churches, evangelists, black churches, and other stigmatized cults such as the Unification Church to disavow any fundamental connection or convergence with the demonic reality of the Peoples Temple. Various Christian studies of the Peoples Temple (Olsen, 1979; Rose, 1979) appeared shortly after the shocking event and endeavored "to develop the imagery of 'Satanic influence,' 'the manipulations of Satan,' and 'false messiahs' in cosmic conflict with the 'true Messiah' in order to account for Jonestown as a manifestation of absolute evil in history" (1988:41). Though cultic or pseudo-religious, Jones' activities and beliefs bore "no relationship to the views and teachings of any legitimate form of Christianity," insisted Billy Graham (Chidester, 1988:40). For Graham, Jones was Satan's slave; for several black leaders and intellectuals he continued the tradition of white slave master dominating blacks. Thus "Jonestown was not a black problem but a problem of the subjection of blacks to white leadership, white authority, and white domination" (1988:44). A conference of black religious elders met to consider the tragedy but clearly rejected critical claims to the effect that a failure of black churches to minister to the problems of their flocks led the latter to seek refuge in the Temple, which did address some needs which the black churches ignored (Chidester, 1988:44). Nevertheless a similar point has recently been made with regard to the Peace Mission of Father Divine (Weisbrot, 1983), which had once served as an inspiration and model for Jim Jones (Chidester, 1988:4-7; Hall, 1987:50-52, 70-72; Weisbrot, 1983:217-219).

Mind-controlling cults were frequently held responsible for Jonestown, but for the most stigmatized of all the new religions, the Unification Church of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, the Peoples Temple "served...as a model of the demonic forces of world domination that it perceived in international communism" (1988:45). For the much

criticized Elizabeth Clare Prophet of the Church Universal and Triumphant, the Jonestown tragedy and the furor it evoked was really a demonic plot to discredit New Age religions.

From Prophet's perspective as well, Jonestown symbolized a dangerous, poisonous, demonic influence from which new religious movements must distance themselves in order to maintain the integrity of their spiritual authority... We learn from the various strategies of cognitive distancing what the Peoples Temple *was not*. From the strategies of psychological distancing we learn that it was not normal, not sane, not human; from the strategies of political distancing we learn it was not American, not socialist... from the strategies of religious distancing we learn it was not Christian, not Black Christian, and not even religion. Each act of distancing was premised on the proposition that the Peoples Temple was 'not like us.'... The sudden, catastrophic end of the Peoples Temple seemed to transform it into a transparent image of negation, an empty space to be filled with any number of different projected images of *otherness*, which served to reinforce a multitude of different psychological, political, and religious commitments (1988:45-46).

Distancing and hidden agendas, suggests Chidester, may be inherent in any attempt at causal explanation of controversial and disturbing social phenomena. "The otherness of Jonestown could not be effectively distanced without first incorporating it into a psychological, political or religious explanatory system. In the end, such explanatory systems have inevitably revealed more about the psychological, political, and religious interests from which they were generated than about the nature of the Peoples Temple" (1988:46). Meaningfully confronting the formidable otherness of Jonestown requires that explanation give way to "an *interpretation* that would clarify the conditions of possibility within which the Peoples Temple emerged as a meaningful human enterprise" (46).

## Salvation and Suicide

Lindt (1981-82:179) has also criticized early attempts at sociological and psychological explanations of Jonestown; "what slips between these categorical approaches is an investigation of the movement's religious character." Chidester comments:

The reason for this lacuna in the literature on the Peoples Temple may lie in the preoccupation with cognitive distancing which has informed most of the explanations of Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and the event of Jonestown. The sheer otherness of the Peoples Temple, as it was appropriated in the popular imagination, has deflected serious consideration of the movement as a religion. The Peoples Temple could be explained as madness or criminal fraud, as a subversive political movement, or perhaps as a deceptive pseudoreligious cult, but the religious character of the Peoples Temple has not been allowed to register within the prevailing, strategic displacement of the movement into the realm of irrecoverable otherness (Chidester, 1988:47).

Chidester proposes a "religiohistorical interpretation" which "may be able to contribute to a recovery of the humanity of its members by attempting to reconstruct something of the design of the worldview that infused it as a church, as a religious movement, and as a utopian community in the jungles of Guyana." Chidester intends "to identify systems for the classification of persons, patterns of spatial and temporal orientation, and strategies of symbolic appropriation, engagement, and inversion by which that religious worldview assumed its unique shape in the history of the Peoples Temple" (1988:50). This analysis will constitute a reflection "on the ambiguous contribution of religion, simultaneously humanizing and dehumanizing, in the construction of human identity" (1988:50).

Religious sects frequently "negotiate salvation" through *symbolic inversion* of social structure and religio-cultural hegemony, e.g., "the last shall be first." According to Chidester, "A coherent theology does in fact emerge from the [California] sermons of Jim Jones" (1988:52), which remained relatively constant despite transformations

experienced by the movement in relocating to Guyana. Chidester analyzes this worldview in terms of *superhuman*, *subhuman* and *human* classifications. Essential to symbolic inversion in Jones' sect is the demystification of the superhuman, transcendent "Sky God" of Judeo-Christian tradition, who is held not to really exist but also to be guilty of vast crimes against humanity including the legitimization of subhuman statuses for blacks, poor, women, etc. Challenging the Sky God or "buzzard God" is the authentic God-Man, Jim Jones, who embodies Divine Socialism and the human potential for deification. Jones' theology, Chidester notes, really involves a variation of the *gnostic redeemer myth* positing a fundamental dualism between the evil creator God and the gnostic savior who emanates from a higher realm of light and who "bypassed the creator God to save those who had the saving knowledge from the prison of creation itself" (1988:56). "Human beings did not need the illusion of an unseen, cruel, egotistical, oppressive Sky God. They required a God in a body, a living savior. They needed Jim Jones" (1988:55).

Much of Jones' rhetoric dealt with the subhuman classifications of blacks. "Because blacks were subclassified in America, preparations must in fact be underway for their elimination... Jones evoked the spectre of concentration camps..." (1988:66; see also Naipaul, 288-290). Christianity and conventional churches were said to uphold the dehumanizing subclassification of blacks. Christianity also degraded women, e.g., Tertullian's view of women as "the Devil's Gateway" for sin. The Bible was also responsible for degrading the poor. Jones' "Apostolic Socialism" was thus intended as *a religion for the subclassified*. It aimed at rejecting and inverting "the systematic classification of persons that supported white social, political, and economic power in America" (1988:69).

In Jones' view human nature was basically good. "The recovery of an inherently good human nature from the evil societal network of capitalism...constituted the explicit program of humanization in the worldview of the Peoples Temple" (1988:72). Disease thus became a metaphor for capitalism, "while healing served as a metaphor for the humanizing influence of socialism" (1988:77). The superhuman gnostic savior promised "an empowerment that would dissolve the dehumanizing bonds of subclassification in American society in order that a fully human society of fully human persons might emerge in a new heaven on earth" (1988:78).

Besides classification of persons, Chidester reconceptualizes and interprets much of the normative life of the Jonestown community in terms of Eliadian categories of orientations toward time and space (Eliade, 1961, 1979). Utopian communities tend to create "meaningful social space" by "reordering the extensions of the body through property and sex in ways that counteract their prevailing order within a larger society" (Chidester, 1988:97). Jones radically *deprivatized* such bodily extensions through prohibitions against involvement with individual possessions and exclusive sexual liaisons. Discussing the "humanistic geography" (Relph, 1976) of Jonestown, the author introduces a provocative distinction between current *recentering* religiopolitical movements such as right-wing fundamentalist groups, which "appropriate and resacralize the central symbols of American civil religion" (Chidester, 1988:87) and recent *decentering* movements which orient themselves to a "center out there" (e.g., a socialist utopia, the New Age, the inner self, Native American traditions, Islam). Such orientation affords a basis for relativizing and devaluing modern American civil space.

In the chapter, "Orientation in Time," Chidester discusses the apocalyptic visions of Jim Jones as they relate to cosmic, historical and body time. Particular emphasis is placed on Jones' expectation of a nuclear holocaust. "Within the worldview of the Peoples Temple, the nuclear apocalypse operated as all other apocalyptic eschatologies to displace symbolically the present social order in an imaginative vision of destruction, redemption, and rebirth at the culmination of cosmic time" (1988:110). Chidester does not, however, seem to give much emphasis to Jones' vision of an imminent genocidal race war, which Naipaul (1981) stresses.

Jim Jones was intensely concerned with his place in history and the revolutionary history-making role of the Temple. Through "revolutionary death" a worthwhile human death could be negotiated in the face of the dehumanizing options of passive death in a nuclear holocaust or through racial genocide. As Chidester and Hall (1981, 1987) have both noted, dramatic mass suicide was intended to achieve for Jones' followers a form of "revolutionary immortality" (Lifton, 1968) or "experiential transcendence of the ordinary rhythms of life" through voluntarily "sacrificing the body to the process, cause, or movement of an ongoing revolution" (Chidester, 1988:106). The posited sacred destiny of the Peoples Temple, dramatized by a stark ritual of collective suicide, evoked

a promise of salvation for humanity from history's endless stream of oppression and bondage, from imminent fascist dictatorship, and from meaningless life and death in an oppressive world.

Chidester's volume is tightly focused on a phenomenological model and interpretive epistemology. It spares the reader many significant details (e.g., on the Temple's economic operations) adumbrated in John Hall's substantially larger and more diversified work. Nevertheless, Chidester's monograph is an impressive tour de force. Though never tedious, it occasionally reads rather like an academic exercise in applying the categories of an abstruse and abstract structuralism. In mapping the Temple's worldview, Chidester perhaps reifies it such that it appears somewhat as a static and universally shared parameter of the Temple's collective life. Not enough light is shed on how the worldview evolved and shifted through the history of the movement, or how what was largely Jones' worldview may have been differentially internalized and interpreted by denizens of what was actually a partly stratified community. Although Chidester's treatment is clearly meant to be "interpretive" rather than explanatory, the reader is naturally going to be rather inquisitive as to why mass suicide unfolded. The answer will seem to be that the worldview caused it; "Collective suicide fused the worldview into a single act" (1988:155). Although the penultimate chapter does provide discussion of events preceding the final slaughter, the author's general treatment does not seem to this writer to provide a sufficient sense of the Jonestown massacre as a contingent catastrophe, a situated event culminating an escalating bitter conflict with fervent and determined antagonists.

## Gone From the Promised Land

Longer and more detailed than *Salvations and Suicide*, John Hall's monograph, *Gone From the Promised Land*, covers the history of the Peoples Temple in substantial detail. Part One (five chapters) deals with the origins and early history of Jim Jones' ministry. Part Two (three chapters) deals with the ideology and organization of the Peoples Temple: its development as a diversified corporate conglomerate; its vision of a "collectivist reformation" (and associated socialization and internal control practices); and its involvement in politics and use of public relations. Chapter six, "The Corporate Conglomerate," is particularly fascinating. In California in the 1970s the Peoples Temple developed an extensive social service/welfare empire which began as an

organization of care-homes for "socially dependent" persons: elderly, disabled, retarded, etc. In effect Jones exploited the deinstitutionalization policies of some California hospitals. "The Temple's approach to social service delivery nevertheless constituted a threat to the established system, particularly at the county level... Because the Temple cultivated an independent source of clients, to a certain degree it rerouted authority to provide social services outside the established inter-organizational social network, thereby challenging existing network organizations" (Hall, 1987:82).

The Temple built up an income base from tax avoidance and real estate equity, plus vertical integration of business services to care-home operators, austere tithing, mail order sales, radio programming and other devices. Participants signed over income (e.g., social security checks) as well as real estate, insurance policies and other valued items to the Temple. Large amounts of cash were kept on hand to provide "ready money that could be allocated without anyone tracing its flow... Following the widespread practices of corporations that seek to get out from under IRS regulation by shifting money out of the United States, the Temple placed much of its money in dummy 'offshore' accounts in countries with favorable banking laws" (1987:89). Yet Temple practices could benefit some socially dependent "clients" whom the Temple represented before social service officials; "it could liberate them from the degrading alienation in being treated as 'things' by anonymous bureaucrats" (1987:104). In its diversified financial manipulations and profitable operations the Temple "mirrored the wider U.S. culture"; yet in another sense the movement constituted "an alien force outside the matrix of culturally understandable motives, be they illegal or legal" (1987:105).

Jones amassed followers and wealth by drawing upon well-worn cultural recipes, but his ends were mysterious: they did not fit within the conventional matrix of religion and business. He did not want to save souls in the hereafter, and for all the wealth he accumulated, he was not interested in personal material gain in this world. The Temple used the institutions of welfare capitalism to underwrite a charismatic struggle against the capitalistic order (Hall, 1987:105).

At the outset of his chapter on "The Corporate Conglomerate,"

Hall (1987:76-78) notes that the Peoples Temple had much in common with utopian communal groups in 17th century America, which "served as 'laboratories' of the new society" (1987:78). The Temple borrowed techniques from both fundamentalist churches and "modern organizational practices." "But the Temple's collectivist form and its unusual sense of mission also propelled it toward a new, synthetic bureaucratic form, one that mirrored the logic of the state and large corporations, but with a different orientation. Peoples Temple became a corporation of people" (1987:78).

One could wish that the author had perhaps gone a step further and considered whether, from an organizational standpoint, there is a generic quality to what he perceives as the unique and ambiguous not-exactly-a-church-yet-not-simply-a-business nature of the Temple, which interrelated spiritual, political and profit-seeking elements. Might this ambiguity not represent a salient generic feature of presently proliferating (and often charismatically led) religiotherapy or "people processing" movements and "Identity Transformation Organizations" (Greil and Rudy, 1984) such as Scientology (Bainbridge and Stark, 1981; Wallis, 1977) and Synanon (Ofshe, 1976, 1980), which also combine religious, political and capitalist operations (Moore, 1980). Yet despite some precedents, to be discussed in a separate essay in this volume, mass suicide is a fairly unique or at least rare outcome, even among "similar" movements or organizations. In other words, beyond the analysis of "general social processes and wider cultural currents at work," there is "left over," something which "cannot be explained by such comparisons...the unique residue of Peoples Temple that requires situational historical explanation" (Hall, 1987:XVIII). The analysis of the Peoples Temple as a movement and the explanation of Jonestown as an event are not one and the same. It is the emphasis on situational explanation, embedded in an overall narrative framework and with specific chapters focusing on particular sociological dynamics, which constitutes the strength of Hall's approach.

In Part Three (four chapters), the author zeroes in on the final years of the movement: the settlement in California, the move to Guyana, the intensifying struggle with the Concerned Relatives, and the opposing and mutually reinforcing typifications of Jonestown as the "Concentration Camp" and the hostile Concerned Relatives and apostates as the "conspiracy." The carnage in Guyana, Hall maintains, "has to be understood as a product of the conflict that emerged between the Peoples Temple and the people who came to call themselves the 'Con-

cerned Relatives.' That struggle quickly overshadowed daily life in Jonestown, and ironically, it intensified the very conditions — maintenance of a facade, infringement of individual liberties, and discipline — that the Temple's opponents declaimed" (1987:210). "At Jonestown the initially metaphoric revolutionary suicide — commitment to a transcendent cause — became transformed into actual mass suicide through struggle with the opposition, a dynamic that brought into play the crisis of a lost cause described by Thucydides. Without a decisive showdown with forsworn opponents, like the face-to-face confrontation involved in the visit to Jonestown by Leo Ryan and those who traveled with him, it is much less likely that the deaths would have occurred" (1987:295).

In the final chapter, "After Jonestown," the author restates an analysis initially developed in his pioneering 1981 article which highlighted the political element:

The key to understanding Jonestown thus lies in the dynamics of conflict between a religious community and an external political order. It is worthwhile to consider in some detail the sociology of martyrdom under such circumstances. In the general case, a religious community that stands in opposition to an external political order forces a choice between the sacred and evil. The choice brings religious conviction to a question of honor, and it is the seedbed of martyrdom (1987:296).

The Peoples Temple was caught between a self-definition as an other-worldly sanctuary "on the other side of the apocalypse" and that of a "warring sect" engaged in an inescapable conflict with an overpowering and putatively vicious and corrupt established order. The inescapability of the conflict and the omnipotence and relentlessness of the conspiracy said to be directed against the Temple was increasingly emphasized by Jones and his close associates. Although this was functional in terms of internal solidarity and control, it undercut the conceptual consolidation of an insulated sanctuary or "post-apocalyptic plateau," such as constructed by most other alienated other-worldly sects, which condemn the broader society as evil but which actually evolve a de facto accommodation (Hall, 1981). "Jones had based the Peoples Temple as a movement on an apocalyptic vision that vacillated between a pre-apocalyptic ethic of confrontation and postapocalyptic ethos of sanctu-

ary" (1987:298). "Mass suicide would unite the divergent public threads of meaningful existence at Jonestown — those of political revolution and religious salvation" (1987:300).

The final catastrophe did not reflect merely Jones' worldview, but arose from the interaction of the latter with the impact of a concerted campaign against Jones and his establishment, the effect of which was to intensify certain elements in the worldview and enhance the stringency of authoritarian controls at Jonestown (see also Chidester, 1988:138-144 in this respect). The gradual escalation of the Concerned Relatives' campaign to intervene against the Guyana settlement and restrict its autonomy was perceived by Jones as a powerful threat to the mission of the movement. The "conspiracy" was seen to embody the inevitable retaliation of a racist and fascist society against a group which represented an alternative model of social cooperation that could not be allowed to survive. The dramatic visitation of Congressman Ryan seemed to be the initial touch of an inexorable crushing embrace bound to destroy the Temple. The spectacle of hundreds of dedicated followers voluntarily relinquishing their lives was to be a symbolic vindication which would repudiate the Concerned Relatives depiction of the Temple as a prison — a "powerful statement of solidarity" which would keep the flame of social justice burning.

Finally, a notable quality of Hall's monograph is the author's concern in the final chapter, and throughout the monograph, with seeing the Peoples Temple against the backdrop of conflicts in American culture and the responses of religious traditions. One of the remarkable things about the Peoples Temple is that, as it evolved, it managed to make contact with so many and diverse currents of apocalyptic religious imagery of national, social, cultural and personal redemption: American Blacks as the Chosen People and New Israel; the Church as a progressive social force; Kingdom Theology and the option for the poor; healing mystiques and ecstatic charismatic religion; premillennial and tribulationist visions; Father Divine's messianic aura; countercultural "consciousness" themes, etc., (see also Naipaul, 1981).

The failure of Jonestown was more than the collapse of a community. Jim Jones and those who followed him established a movement that fused the central dilemmas of modern Christianity — philosophical antithesis of Christianity — a "godless" yet prophetic vision of com-

munism. These ideological themes found their concrete expression in a movement of *declassé* true believers — black, white, poor, working class and professional — who renounced their professional lives for a cause. In life they adopted the legacy of black suffering as the vehicle that carried forward their quest for redemption (1987:303).

Hall throws down the gauntlet for responsible historians, sociologists, theologians and political scientists who would study one of the cataclysmic events of our time. "In death," he writes, "[Peoples Temple] relinquished the burden of history to those of us who remain" (1987:303).

### Notes

1. For review and discussion of the sociological research on "NRMs," see recent works by Barker (1986), Bromley and Hammond (1988), and Robbins (1988, a,b).

2. The reader on *Violence and Religious Commitment* edited by Levi (1982) includes slightly revised versions of the original articles by Richardson (1980) and Robbins (1988a,b).

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