

## Review Essay

# Peoples Temple Revisited

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Rebecca Moore

*Dear People: Remembering Jonestown.* Edited by Denice Stephenson. California Historical Society Press and Heyday Books, 2005. xvii + 171 pages. \$16.95 paper.

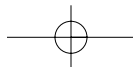
*Gone from the Promised Land: Jonestown in American Cultural History.* By John R. Hall. 2d ed. Transaction Publishers, 2004. xxvi + 381. \$29.95 paper.

*Salvation and Suicide: Jim Jones, The Peoples Temple, and Jonestown.* By David Chidester. Rev. ed. Indiana University Press, 2003. xxviii + 190 pages. \$19.95 paper.

Shortly after the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1978 deaths in Jonestown, Guyana, two scholarly works about Peoples Temple were re-issued, and an edited collection of primary source documents housed at the California Historical Society debuted.<sup>1</sup> Chidester's *Salvation and Suicide* and Hall's *Gone from the Promised Land* belonged to Thomas Robbins' "second wave" of scholarly literature assessing Peoples Temple.<sup>2</sup> The first wave, which covered the initial decade of analysis, consisted of Judith Weightman's *Making Sense of the Jonestown Suicides*, the first full-length sociological study of Peoples Temple;<sup>3</sup> a reader edited by Ken Levi that featured articles by James T. Richardson, John R. Hall, Thomas Robbins, Dick Anthony, Anson Shupe, and David Bromley, among others;<sup>4</sup> and "a handful of articles dealing specifically with the Peoples Temple and its spectacular holocaust."<sup>5</sup> Many of the earliest articles consisted of psychological studies of group membership.

I identified a third wave of academic literature comprising comparative studies—which emerged in response to the demise of the Branch Davidians in 1993—and ethnic and gender studies of the movement.<sup>6</sup>

*Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, Volume 10, Issue 1, pages 111–118, ISSN 1092-6690 (print), 1541-8480 (electronic). © 2006 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Rights and Permissions website, at [www.ucpress.edu/journals/rights.htm](http://www.ucpress.edu/journals/rights.htm).



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John R. Hall, Thomas Robbins, and Dick Anthony contributed to the continuing discussion of Peoples Temple in light of events at Waco in Stuart A. Wright's volume *Armageddon at Waco*, while Catherine Wessinger's *How the Millennium Comes Violently* also put Jonestown in comparative perspective.

Ethnic and gender studies had long been neglected, with even some of the earliest—such as C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya's important “Daddy Jones and Father Divine: The Cult as Political Religion”<sup>7</sup>—missing from Robbins' 1989 assessment. In 1978 Archie Smith Jr. had presciently described scholarly disregard for discussing black manifestations of new religions,<sup>8</sup> and later on wrote several articles about Peoples Temple. *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown*, by Mary McCormick Maaga, analyzed female leadership in the movement, and it remains an insightful critique of Hall's discussion of women.

With the ongoing publication of new examinations of Peoples Temple and Jonestown from scholars around the world it may be time to abandon the wave metaphor in favor of more descriptive categories, such as psychological studies, first-person accounts, anticult literature, and so on. Even these categories are not entirely satisfactory since they overlap, with some first-person accounts also representing classic apostate reports.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, we can securely place the second editions of the Hall and Chidester books within the Religious Studies genre, though Stephenson's book defies easy categorization.<sup>10</sup>

Chidester and Hall's new editions are unchanged from the 1988 and 1987 versions respectively, except for the introductory material. Both writers conducted extensive research in the aftermath of Jonestown that has not been surpassed.<sup>11</sup> Both laid the groundwork for subsequent research by others, including myself,<sup>12</sup> in a number of different areas. Despite the commanding, yet differing strengths of each work, Hall's book wears better over time. There are several reasons for this.

First, Hall provides the most accurate, complete, and factual discussion of Peoples Temple of any account in print. This is history writing at its best: reviewing primary sources and then drawing conclusions and making connections from the data. Although he relied chiefly upon written and audiotaped sources, Hall also interviewed a number of individuals connected with the movement. Whenever anyone asks for a recommended read on Jonestown, I always advise going to Hall's book first.

Second, Hall has continued to review and refine the views presented in *Gone From the Promised Land*. This is evident in the comparative articles written after Waco,<sup>13</sup> as well as in his study of the Solar Temple that informed the work *Apocalypse Observed*.<sup>14</sup> His interest in utopian groups, communal experiments and religious violence is on-going, from his earliest writings to his most recent. As he notes in the Introduction to the second edition, Peoples Temple must be understood within both utopian and countercultural contexts: “the group channeled a distinctive

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confluence of its historical moment—of Left politics aligned with interracial communalism, wrapped within an organization that was unusual in its capacity to infuse countercultural discourse with a radicalized religiosity” (p. xi).

Finally, Hall’s book is useful in locating Jonestown within American cultural history, as its subtitle indicates. It helps readers understand Peoples Temple as a part of the dynamism of religion in the United States by identifying its family resemblances to Pentecostalism, liberal Protestantism, countercultural Leftism, apocalyptic millennialism, and other broad movements in America. The connections that Hall’s analysis makes between Peoples Temple and other groups show that, far from being anomalous, the Temple was within American religious, cultural, and social traditions, both in the mainstream and on the fringe.

In contrast, Chidester states in his Preface that his primary interest “is not with social history as such but with the distinctive character of the religious worldview generated within the Peoples Temple by the discourse of Jim Jones” (p. xiii). His book attempts to reconstruct this worldview phenomenologically by analyzing hundreds of hours of audiotapes. The inspiration for his analysis seems to come from Jonathan Z. Smith’s complaint that

we know the pornography of Jonestown; we do not know its mythology, its ideology, its soteriology, its sociology. . . . We know almost nothing of what [Jones] said. But we do know enough, as a matter of principle, to refuse to accept prematurely the option of declaring that it is unintelligible and, hence, in some profound sense inhuman.<sup>15</sup>

Chidester follows up on this and several other comments that Smith makes: from analyzing the “distance” that the media and others created between those who died in Jonestown and the rest of us; to analyzing the “space” that the Temple created for itself; to remarking that interpreting is not the same as approving of, or advocating for, the group.

*Salvation and Suicide* indeed analyzes the worldview of Jim Jones, by inducing its mythology, ideology, and soteriology from his sermons and writings. The book constructs typologies of persons, space, and time that reveal the complexities and layers of ideas and thoughts that existed within the movement. The chapters on “Orientation in Time” and on “Revolutionary Suicide” help clarify why mass suicide might have been a logical, and even a desirable, choice for people in Jonestown to make.

The problem with this type of analysis, however, is its focus on the leader to the exclusion of the members. While “a coherent theology does in fact emerge from the sermons of Jim Jones” (p. 52), one must ask if this was a theology either understood or accepted by the members. Did anyone besides Jim Jones discuss a “sky god” or a god of “Apostolic Socialism” or “Principle”? First-person accounts indicate that the senior

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citizens in Jonestown maintained traditional Christian beliefs,<sup>16</sup> while conversations with former members indicate a general absence of god-talk. For example, when I wrote former members and asked what Jim Jones said about God, one replied that Jim's message was: "You don't wait for miracles to happen, you make them. You do things, make change without metaphysical namby pamby jargon."<sup>17</sup> Thus, the members of Peoples Temple may not have shared Jones' theology.

Further, as more and more primary source documents become available, and as survivors begin to tell the story of Peoples Temple in their own words, such a typological analysis suffers from being inaccurate, and not simply irrelevant. More than fifteen years have elapsed since Chidester's book first came out, and more information rather than less is now available for a phenomenological analysis. For example, the Jonestown Institute (run by Fielding McGehee III and myself) has uploaded more than one hundred-fifty transcripts of audiotapes, and numerous primary source documents generated by and about Peoples Temple on the website "Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple" (<<http://jonestown.sdsu.edu>>). Audiotapes made in Jonestown show an almost complete absence of any sort of religious rhetoric. Similarly, the passage of time has clarified a number of issues. Asserting that "the Jonestown dead were human dead" might have been daring in 1988—and even more daring in 1982 when Smith said it, quoting my father John V Moore who said it on 26 November 1978—but in 2006 it seems obvious, especially in light of the current staging of a major theatrical production titled *The People's Temple*,<sup>18</sup> which humanizes the people of Jonestown by giving them voice in dramatic fashion. A documentary to air on PBS' *American Experience* in 2007 also depicts Jonestown residents in a sensitive manner.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, Chidester's book has not held up as well over time as Hall's, nor has he continued to develop his views as Hall has. What we get is a moment in scholarly time—the 1980s—which is valuable in its way, but incomplete. This is unfortunate, given the fact that Chidester's analysis is reproduced in the revised edition of the *Encyclopedia of Religion*.<sup>20</sup>

A minor complaint I have about both scholarly volumes is that the new paperback covers are garish and sensationalistic. While the previous edition of Chidester did feature the iconic image of the bodies surrounding the vat of poison, the current edition makes the vat even larger, with the bodies more apparent as bodies. Given the fact that Chidester decries the "pornography of Jonestown," the image seems to capitalize on such pornography. Hall's previous volume featured Jim Jones preaching; the current volume has loud, and large, red type superimposed over a black-and-white photo. Both of these covers contrast greatly from the subtle, and gentle, presentation of *Dear People*, which displays a palm tree, with a snapshot of a group of workers, including Jim Jones, in Jonestown.

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Stephenson's edited collection presents Peoples Temple in the words of its members, without benefit of analysis—and yet a type of analysis exists in the arrangement and editing. The archivist for the California Historical Society grouped the materials from CHS files into a chronological history of the group. The book presents information that anyone studying a new religious movement longs for: the internal working papers and day-to-day notes and memos of the group. Stephenson helps the reader follow developments within Peoples Temple by providing background information prior to each selection of readings

The advantage of many of these documents is that they were written unselfconsciously, that is, uncolored by the deaths in Jonestown. We read the "Guide for the Hostess" on the Temple's bus trips that advises bringing along a mop and broom to clean up bathroom facilities after the group leaves a rest stop. "Tell the driver [of the bus] you will check the facilities, and be *sure* that both men & women [*sic*] restrooms are clean. If we mess them up, quickly sweep and damp mop them" (p. 27). The reason for doing this was to create good will for Peoples Temple. We read biographies of individuals—some written to exaggerate the benefits of Peoples Temple, but revealing nevertheless—that indicate the great diversity of religious and socio-economic backgrounds of Temple members.

Most enlightening are the letters of criticism that people wrote to Jim Jones. Hall and Chidester note individual self-criticism within the community, but Stephenson includes notes that both advise and criticize Jim Jones. Harriet Tropp wrote about "The Uglification of Jonestown," which occurred because Jones wanted the pathways paved for visitors, despite cautions against doing so. She admitted to Jones that, "no one is willing to oppose your opinion in certain matters, and I frankly think that sometimes you are wrong, and no one is willing to say so. I realize this is quite a volatile statement, but I think it is one factor in the dynamics of how this organization functions that gets us in trouble" (p. 101). Gene Chaikin warned Jones that the community might never be financially self-sufficient: "We see that historically small, self-contained communities have always failed" (p. 100). My sister Carolyn Moore Layton suggested to Jones that he and some of the children move to Cuba to escape persecution.

The project could go on here [in Jonestown] if it can maintain and if the people leave, then they could just go and we could see what happens. There are a number of people who would love it here if the group size were smaller and more manageable and without crowding, less people to feed, the economic strain would be less. . . . I am not saying the group as it now exists could hold together, but a group might and the farm would even have a chance of self-sufficiency (p. 106).

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These notes show thoughtful and measured planning efforts, as well as the struggle to run a communal enterprise. They also expose fissures within the community that were never disclosed to outsiders.

Stephenson's collection represents a fraction of the materials housed at the California Historical Society. One document, an extremely detailed journal maintained by Edith Roller, a member who died in Jonestown, is currently being transcribed with an eye to publication as an edited volume. Other treasures may exist in the extensive collection as well.

These three volumes contribute greatly to our understanding of Peoples Temple and Jonestown, each in its own distinctive fashion. Hall locates the Temple within American cultural history; Chidester describes a theology of Jim Jones; Stephenson presents members and outsiders in their own voices. It is clear that the passage of time has not diminished interest in Jonestown or Peoples Temple. We are fortunate to have books like these to clarify the meaning, and the events, for new generations of readers.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> A fourth volume came out as well and is reviewed in this issue of *Nova Religio*: Rebecca Moore, Anthony B. Pinn, and Mary R. Sawyer, eds., *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Robbins, "The Second Wave of Jonestown Literature: A Review Essay," in *New Religious Movements, Mass Suicide, and Peoples Temple: Scholarly Perspectives on a Tragedy*, ed. Rebecca Moore and Fielding McGehee III (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), 113–34.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Weightman, *Making Sense of the Jonestown Suicides* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> Ken Levi, ed., *Violence and Religious Commitment: Implications of Jim Jones' Peoples Temple Movement* (University Park, Penn.: Penn State Press, 1982).

<sup>5</sup> Robbins, "The Second Wave of Jonestown Literature," 114.

<sup>6</sup> Rebecca Moore, "Is the Canon on Jonestown Closed?" *Nova Religio* 4, no. 1 (October 2000): 7–27. Comparative studies included Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony, "Sects and Violence: Factors Enhancing the Volatility of Marginal Religious Movements," in *Armageddon at Waco: Critical Perspectives on the Branch Davidian Conflict*, ed. Stuart A. Wright (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 236–59; John R. Hall and Philip Schuyler, "Apostasy, Apocalypse, and Religious Violence: An Exploratory Comparison of Peoples Temple, the Branch Davidians, and the Solar Temple," in *The Politics of Religious Apostasy: The Role of Apostates in the Transformation of Religious Movements*, ed. David Bromley (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998), 141–69; and Catherine Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven's Gate* (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2000). Studies that focus on ethnic and gender studies include Mary McCormick Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998);



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Archie Smith Jr., "An Interpretation of the Peoples Temple and Jonestown: Implications for the Black Church," in *The Relational Self: Ethics and Therapy from a Black Church Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 187–31; and Archie Smith, Jr., "We Need to Press Forward: Black Religion and Jonestown, Twenty Years Later," on the "Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple" website, <<http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/AboutJonestown/Articles/smith.htm>>, published November 1998.

<sup>7</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, "Daddy Jones and Father Divine: The Cult as Political Religion," *Religion in Life* 49 (1980): 6–23, reprinted in Moore, Pinn, and Sawyer, *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America*, 28–46.

<sup>8</sup> Archie Smith Jr., "Black Reflections on the Study of New Religious Consciousness," in *Understanding the New Religions*, ed. Jacob Needleman and George Baker (New York: Seabury, 1978), 209–19.

<sup>9</sup> Two examples of this kind of literature—one early and one late—are Jeannie Mills, *Six Years With God: Life inside Rev. Jim Jones's Peoples Temple* (New York: A&W Publishers, 1979); and Deborah Layton, *Seductive Poison: A Survivor's Tale of Life and Death in the Peoples Temple* (New York: Anchor Doubleday, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> "Wave theory" has been a popular way to structure the discussions of terrorism ever since publication of David Rapoport's "The Fourth Wave: September 11 in the History of Terrorism," *Current History* 100, no. 650 (December 2001): 419–25.

<sup>11</sup> A journalistic treatment that features intensive primary research through interviews is *Raven: The Untold Story of the Rev. Jim Jones and His People* by Tim Reiterman and John Jacobs (New York: Dutton, 1982). This excellent research is marred by a tendentious agenda that begins from the presupposition that Jim Jones was crazy. It fails to take the movement's goals seriously.

<sup>12</sup> Chidester's work informs "Drinking the Kool-Aid: The Cultural Transformation of a Tragedy," *Nova Religio* 7, no. 2 (November 2003): 92–100, while Hall influenced "'American as Cherry Pie': Peoples Temple and Violence in America," in *Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence: Historical Cases*, ed. Catherine Wessinger (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 121–37.

<sup>13</sup> John R. Hall, "Public Narratives and the Apocalyptic Sect: From Jonestown to Mt. Carmel," in Wright, *Armageddon in Waco*, 205–35.

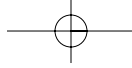
<sup>14</sup> John R. Hall, with Philip D. Schuyler and Sylvaine Trinh, *Apocalypse Observed: Religious Movements and Violence in North America, Europe, and Japan* (London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Devil in Mr. Jones," in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 111.

<sup>16</sup> Catherine (Hyacinth) Thrash, *The Onliest One Alive: Surviving Jonestown Guyana* (Indianapolis: Marian K. Towne, 1995). A detailed analysis of the religious views held by Temple members appears in Mary R. Sawyer, "The Church in Peoples Temple," in Moore, Pinn, and Sawyer, *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America*, 166–93.

<sup>17</sup> Don Beck, email dated 7 September 2005.

<sup>18</sup> *The People's Temple*, directed by Leigh Fondakowski and co-written by Leigh Fondakowski, Greg Pierotti, Steve Wangh and Margo Hall, premiered April 2005 at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre. It has since been staged at the Perseverance



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Theatre in Juneau, Alaska, and at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

<sup>19</sup> *Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple* was written by Marcia Smith, directed by Stanley Nelson, and produced by Firelight Media. It premiered 22 January 2006 in Salt Lake City.

<sup>20</sup> David Chidester, "Jonestown and Peoples Temple," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones, 2d ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2005), 7: 4952–56.

