
Moral Evil and the Jonestown Tragedy

Michael McCabe

The mass suicide of more than 900 members of an American religious sect, known as the 'Peoples' Temple', in the jungles of Guyana last November has made a profound impact on public opinion throughout the world. The initial emotional reactions to the tragedy have varied between shock, pity, horror, disgust, moral indignation and even anger. One person whose reaction I sought exploded into an angry diatribe against American society and its *laissez faire* attitude towards the proliferation of religious sects. At a more intellectual level a great number of post mortems have already appeared in newspapers, journals and magazines, offering a variety of interpretations and assessments of this horrible and irrational act.

ZEAL OR FANATICISM?

Initial attempts to assess incidents such as the Jonestown suicides usually tend to issue in exaggerated claims and wild judgments. Perceptive analysis tends to get smothered in a clutter of oversimplifications and facile generalizations. In the Jonestown post mortems which I read, even those which tried to achieve a degree of balance and objectivity in the assessments, there was a definite tendency to highlight the abnormal and grotesque aspects of the event. I do not deny the reality of these aspects but I feel that, in emphasizing them, we insulate ourselves against the impact of the tragedy. The event comes to be seen as alien and remote. Its evil is so distanced from the everyday ambit of our lives that we are not really disturbed or threatened by it and certainly not compelled to question our basic assumptions about ourselves and the society we live in.

'The landscape of their minds as grotesque as the corpse-littered village they left behind' is how *Time* magazine described the scene after the suicides. Giovanni Marchesi S.I., describing the mass-suicide as 'an act of blind, irrational fanaticism', claims that 'The People's Temple' sect had nothing in common with genuine religious sentiment and should not properly have been called a religious sect at

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all (*La Civiltà Cattolica*, Dec. 16). In the light of what happened it is perhaps easy to sustain such a claim and of course every religious denomination and sect will naturally want to dissociate itself from a group capable of so irrational an act. Yet the basis for dissociation is neither as clear nor as decisive as it is often made to appear. It would be more honest and ultimately more fruitful to admit the difficulty of distinguishing religious zeal from religious fanaticism, genuine religious sentiment from false religious consciousness.

CULTIC FEATURES

'The Peoples' Temple' sect shared, it seems to me, a great deal in common with the many cultic movements which have become a striking feature of religion in the 70's and with certain forms of religious revival which have taken shape within the more structured and mainstream Christian Churches. Charismatic Renewal is one example of a religious revival with definite cultic characteristics which is exercising a significant influence on the life of the Catholic Church. Although such movements seem to hold a special attraction for psychologically disturbed people, the majority of people who belong to them are as normal as those who shy away from anything with cultic overtones. To generalize, the features which characterize them are as follows:

1. A strong emphasis on a personal religious experience which is seen as constituting a radical change in the individual's life. Members speak of this experience as something which happens to them, as opposed to something which they themselves could bring about. The experience is seen as gift, as grace.
2. A strong sense of group identity. Many Catholic charismatics find a much greater sense of identity with the particular group to which they belong than they do with the Church.
3. A profound sense of a divine presence and power working within the group and directing it.
4. A strong belief in the devil and the forces of evil.
5. A childlike faith and trust in Providence. 'Letting go' to God is very much emphasized in Charismatic prayer. Reason is often seen as an obstacle to this 'letting go'.
6. A strong emphasis on maintaining the unity of the group and a generally intolerant attitude towards dissenters.

THE LEADER

In many sects and cults the position of the leader is very important. He puts himself forward as an absolute authority figure and unifying

focus for the group. This is not the case in the Catholic Charismatic movement. In the case of the 'Peoples' Temple' sect this focus on the leader seems to have existed in a particularly exaggerated form. Jim Jones became a 'god-like' figure who finally, it seems, came to exercise a demonic reign of terror over the members of his community. But if that is what he became, it should also be remembered that the record of his life up to a short time before the Jonestown suicides reveals a man of very high ideals and with a deep concern for suffering humanity. His reading of the Bible had inspired him with a love for those whom society tends to reject or ignore. The record of his humanist activities is formidable. He adopted coloured children. He was at one time a director of a human rights commission in Indianapolis. In San Francisco's inner city area he opened an infirmary, a child-care centre, a carpentry shop, and a kitchen for the poor of the neighbourhood. He was involved in social action for justice and backed liberal causes. On one occasion he organized his sect to pick litter off the Capitol grounds, for which the 'Peoples' Temple' were proclaimed 'tourists of the year' by the *Washington Post* (Aug. '73). Those (not members of his sect) who knew Jim Jones did not regard him either as a fanatic or as abnormal. They got the impression that he was naive, but what idealist does not give a similar impression to those who consider themselves realists? Furthermore, while the sect may have given evidence of unconventional behaviour, it does not appear to have been abnormally bizarre or freakish. Certainly there was little to indicate that it was capable of committing a blind act of self-destruction.

All in all, I think we should be prepared to accept the fairly ordinary and acceptable beginnings of Jim Jones and his sect. We should also accept that, among the varied and ambiguous needs and motivations which brought the 'Peoples' Temple' into existence, there was a certain idealism and an attraction to something intrinsically good. If this assessment is justified — and I propose that it should be given serious consideration — then the evil which took possession of this sect and led to its self-annihilation on November 18 cannot easily be sealed off in a special compartment and pushed outside the ambit of our lives. Rather, it should heighten our awareness of how intimate are the realities of sin and evil to the circuit of our everyday lives.

PERVASIVE MORAL EVIL

It would seem ironic that in an age which abounds with examples which virtually constitute its empirical verification, the doctrine of Original Sin should need reaffirmation. Yet there is ample evidence to suggest just such a need. Theories which tend to situate evil in the political and social structures of human society have surfaced and

become popular in recent years. The evidence of recent history, the profound insights of the neo-orthodox theologians, Barth, Brunner, Tillich and the Niebuhrs, into the nature of sin, the powerful message of Golding's *Lord of the Flies* were readily set aside to be replaced by more facile, reductionist accounts which were more acceptable because more comfortable and more comforting. The Jonestown tragedy may once again serve to remind us of the pervasive and persistent character of moral evil. The capacity of the sin in us to take hold of human enterprises from the most banal to the most sublime and, like a corrupting leaven working in a hidden manner from within, bring them to ruin and disaster should not be lost sight of.

A number of commentators have already dismissed Jonestown as simply an example of psychological sickness. From a limited and particular viewpoint a plausible case can be made for the claim. But it is not the whole story, not by a long shot. It is a description of the state of mind from which a certain kind of behaviour flows. It does not offer an adequate explanation of what led to that behaviour. The categories of 'sin' and 'moral evil' purport to offer an explanation, from a theological viewpoint, of certain kinds of human behaviour. Suicide, as the supreme rejection of one's life, has always come under the heading of such behaviour and been seen as an essentially evil act. That does not imply a judgment in regard to the subjective guilt or innocence of the person who commits it. Plausible psychological assessment of the mental state of the person committing such an act is certainly relevant to this latter consideration. However, it is both naive and inadequate to reduce moral evil to psychological illness and to imagine that, when we have devised the correct cure for such illness, the problem of moral evil will have been eliminated and goodness will be as natural to man as breathing.

EVIL IN THE HEART

Jonestown can also be seen as a counterblast to theories which look to the structure of society rather than to individuals in seeking an explanation for the existence of evil. Jim Jones attempted to cut himself and his sect off from the contaminating influence of the evil structures of American society and ended in succumbing to a greater evil. He attempted to create a haven of innocence in the jungles of Guyana, a kind of heaven of earth; it turned into a hellish nightmare.

The capacity for evil is as interior to man as the capacity for goodness. As soon as man expresses himself, both evil and good become actual and these actualizations are frequently knotted, one into the other. The structures in which man organizes his social life are stamped with this inherent ambiguity. The evil of sin becomes imbedded in them as is also the limited good which he has been

capable of expressing. There is much evidence to support the theory put forward by Reinhold Niebuhr, forty seven years ago, in his *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, viz., that the collective behaviour of man in his social groupings greatly compounds and intensifies the evil tendencies in the individual. Group egotism is a much more subtle and powerful evil force to curb than is individual evil. But the evil which is found in the structures of human society finds its origin in the heart of man. Of course we must seek to remove evil from the structures as well as trying to purge our hearts individually. The real danger today is that of overemphasizing the capacity of a changed structure to change the individual. If Jonestown acts as a counterblast to such an emphasis some good may emerge from the tragedy.

THE NEED FOR NORMS

Alan Davies, a Canadian Protestant theologian, commenting on the Jonestown incident, made the remark that 'Nothing is as bad as bad religion.' This may well be true but the question is 'How does one distinguish bad from good religion?' The tares which grow among the wheat may look very like the wheat for a long time. In concrete cases of particular religious beliefs and practices is there not always some admixture of what is false and evil with what is true and good? Perhaps the danger of self-deception is more pronounced in less structured and more cultic forms of religious expression. That, however, is not a justification for dismissing 'cult' as a bad thing and denigrating all appeals to religious experience as suspect and abnormal. What it does highlight is the need for the existence of norms by which to discern the nature of such experiences, to interpret and understand them. In religions with long histories and developed traditions criteria of discernment were evolved by which to establish the authenticity of religious experiences. These experiences were never taken as self-authenticating. Cults tend to take the experience element too much for granted and overlook the need to evaluate and authenticate it. They are too dismissive of the refinements of tradition and the codifications of dogma. Even if tradition, dogma, liturgical and moral norms sometimes become chains which can imprison experiences and deprive them of their creative power, they also act as an anchor for experience. They provide a base from which to establish the meaning and value of new experiences. Jonestown highlights the particular danger inherent in cults and cultic movements, the danger of reaching for the stars without having solid roots in the earth. Like a tree, we need the immensity of the heavens above us and the depth of the earth beneath us in order to stand upright, and to stay that way.

CHARISMATIC RENEWAL

I have heard a number of people make comparisons between the charismatic renewal movement and 'The Peoples' Temple'. Such comparisons can be made too easily and too glibly. The points of contrast are more evident than the points of comparison. However, the charismatics could learn something from Jonestown, too. Do they exaggerate the importance of religious experience? Do they not tend to react too negatively to self-criticism from within their ranks? Are they sufficiently appreciative of the values embodied in the official churches of which they are first and foremost members? Are they too inclined to see the experiences of the group, especially in prayer, as experiences of the Spirit?

Charismatic Renewal certainly stresses the Lordship of Christ and calls for submission to his Spirit. This acts as a safeguard against the risk of giving undue prominence and an exalted status to the group leader. However, it is not, perhaps, sufficiently sceptical about man's ability, even when graced, authentically to discern and unambiguously to express the continuing working of the Spirit in the world. We see now as through a glass, darkly. We brush up against the Spirit rather than encounter him directly. Our understanding of the ways of God with men is something like the view one would get if one studied the galaxies with toy binoculars. There is need for caution, born out of a genuine humility, in the claims we make about our knowledge and understanding of the Spirit of God based on personal experiences.

THE BANALITY OF EVIL

Finally, the Jonestown tragedy may become a symbol today for a particular kind of evil which can destroy human intelligence and captivate human will. It should not turn our hearts or our minds away from the many other, no less real, evils in society, though they may not have the apocalyptic impact of a Jonestown. These are the evils of selfishness and greed, of egotism, operating at the individual and collective levels of man's existence, which continues to perpetuate misery and want, to oppress and exploit whole masses of dependent peoples, to misuse capital, subvert democratic structures and deform Marxist ideology into a cynical and repressive political system. We need to recognize the banality of evil, and see how very much it is part and parcel of our everyday lives. We are all too ready to use an event like the Jonestown tragedy to put evil on a pedestal, make it seem spectacular and unreal and exile it on an alien shore. In fact evil is very much at home with us and it is we who are in exile because of it. In the light of Jonestown, our prayer should be that we be delivered from the pride which makes us blind to the real source of

evil and which holds us back from embracing the solution which the Father offers us through his Son, Jesus Christ, and which cost not less than Calvary.

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