Dilemmas of Charismatic Leadership: The Case of the People's Temple*

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The purpose of this paper is two-fold. First, a theoretical model of charismatic leadership is developed which focuses primarily on strategies the leader adopts to strengthen his leadership position and to overcome its inherent precariousness. Some of these strategies center on internal relations within the group, and some deal with the group's relations with the environment. Paradoxically, however, these strategies, even if successful, have unintended consequences which may undermine the leader's charismatic power and authority. The second goal is to apply this theoretical model in an ex post facto interpretation of the evolution of the People's Temple, under Rev. Jones' influence, and its culmination in the mass suicides in Guyana. The theoretical model in this paper provides an alternative to the popular interpretation of the mass suicides in Guyana, and of sects and cults generally, as reflecting psychopathological problems and deficiencies in the social environment.

Social scientific efforts to understand or to explain a catastrophic event as bizarre as the mass suicides at Jonestown are bound to appear presumptuous and inadequate. Our curiosity is not easily satisfied with ordinary or mundane explanations. The temptation has been strong for some interpreters to see in these events not only the psychopathological characteristics of those directly involved, but also a symptom of some deep and widespread moral breakdown or perversion in American society.

Much of the traditional sociological analysis of cult or sect organizations focuses either on the psychological or social psychological needs of its members or on the deficiencies and uncertainties of the wider social environment in which such groups emerge (Glock and Stark, 1965: Ch. 13; Eister, 1972; Hine, 1974; Marty, 1960; Talmon, 1969). According to the typical social psychological approach, the most likely recruits to cult organizations are persons who are relatively isolated, lacking in meaning and purpose, lower in social status, deprived, alienated, seeking simplistic solutions, and (as a result) susceptible to psychological manipulation. Such persons are assumed to be attracted to cults or sects because these groups promise purpose, security, love and social acceptance, status and satisfying roles, and communal solidarity.

On a more macroscopic level, it has often been noted that sects and cults tend to arise and flourish in an unstable, highly turbulent, and rapidly changing social environment, when established traditions break down and there is a widespread search for alternative values and normative patterns, life-styles, and organizational forms. In many cases, as Durkheim suggested, people's expectations exceed opportunities for achievement, resulting in increased frustration and anomie. Such a climate is conducive to wide-spread collective behavior and to the emergence of numerous social movements. New religious groups proliferate as deprived people seek a more satisfying alternative to established religious institutions.

With some exceptions (Barnes, 1978), the leaders of sectarian or cultic organizations have not been analyzed as extensively as the recruits or as the social climate from which they

come. Weber's (1947: 358-73) well-known analyses of the charismatic leader and the religious prophet (1963: 46-59) are generally assumed to be relevant, even though specific information regarding leaders' personal characteristics or the dynamics of their relations with their followers is often lacking. It is popular for those not sympathetic to their message or their tactics to denounce them as charlatans guilty of brainwashing gullible recruits or as victims of paranoia and delusions of grandeur. On the other hand, charismatic leaders who are widely admired may be seen as having outstanding qualities which are particularly suited for helping solve the crises of the times. It was this feature that Weber emphasized strongly.

One goal of this paper is to suggest a model of the interactional and organizational dynamics of sectarian or cult groups which centers on the strategies used by their charismatic leaders to resolve some of the dilemmas of leadership and to bolster their power within the group. This focus on interactional dynamics and organizational strategies provides an alternative to the popular view that sect and cult members (and perhaps their leaders) are suffering from psychopathological disturbances or that they are recruited from disturbed or pathological social environments.

A second goal will be to apply this theoretical model to the tragic mass suicides in Jonestown, Guyana. When seen in the light of the theoretical model, the behavior of Jones in ordering his followers to drink the cyanide-laced punch can be understood as the culmination of organizational dynamics set in motion as a result of a series of earlier decisions which, only in retrospect, turned out to be crucial for moving the group unconsciously toward its eventual self-inflicted doom. This disastrous outcome emerged as an unintended byproduct of earlier decisions which were not necessarily pathological in themselves but were understandable strategies any leader might use in an attempt to reinforce his leadership position.

Theoretical Model: Strategies for Coping with Leadership Dilemmas

The central thesis of our theoretical model is that charismatic leadership is tenuous and precarious, shot through with uncertainty and ambiguity, and in need of continual social reinforcement. Lacking well-established institutional supports, the charismatic leader is bound to experience the precariousness of his/her position more fully than other types of leaders. Even if he/she suffers from pathological delusions of grandeur, social validation will still be needed to maintain the delusional system. Weber (1947:360) seemed to acknowledge the precariousness of charismatic leadership in his discussion of the need for the charismatic leader to demonstrate over and over again his/her charismatic qualities. If the leader claims possession of magical or supernatural powers, these must be demonstrated periodically by the performance of miracles. The apparent ability to perform miracles provides objective and dramatic evidence of the charismatic leader's claims and so helps overcome the precariousness of his/her position. The acclaim and compliance of followers is undoubtedly rewarding to the charismatic leader. We should thus expect the charismatic leader to attempt to strengthen his/her leadership position. This effort is by no means unusual or pathological, nor is it limited to charismatic leaders. Rather, the motivation to enhance or strengthen one's power is wide-spread among large segments of the population and is expressed in numerous ways in practically all major institutional contexts.

What are the strategies available to the charismatic leader to strengthen his/her position of power? One strategy is *to make the members as dependent as possible* upon the leader or his/her group for meeting their social, emotional, and material needs (Emerson, 1962; Blau, 1964:115-25). This no doubt helps explain the attractiveness of sects and cults to those suffering various kinds of deprivation. It also helps explain why sect and cult leaders often focus their recruiting efforts on the deprived. If the members do not have resources

they can use to reciprocate for benefits received, the stage is set for the emergence of a dependency relation. In some cases the charismatic leader is not content to rely solely on his/her charisma. A common pattern is to require members to renounce social ties outside the group (even with their families) and to contribute all their resources to the group. The effect is to create maximum dependence on the group for both physical and psychological needs.

There is a price that must be paid for this strategy, however. Members who find themselves in a completely dependent and subordinate relation with the charismatic leader may eventually come to resent their subordination and to resist the leader's demands. As Blau (1964:314-21) pointed out, the social processes that promote stabilization of a power structure also, by the same token, stimulate the emergence of opposition movements. The greater the success of the leader in establishing his/her power over subordinates, the greater the likelihood that eventually this power will be resisted.

Another strategy commonly used by sectarian or cultic leaders to reinforce or to promote their power is *to seek organizational growth.* Paradoxically, however, growth beyond a certain point inevitably leads to a change in the nature of the relationship between the leader and the followers. This is due in part to the difficulty of maintaining emotionally close relations among all the members of a large organization. Accordingly, some members will not be as emotionally dependent on the leader as others and thus will have less reason to grant total loyalty to the leader. Also, large groups inevitably are more heterogeneous than smaall ones, and the effects of this heterogeneity compound the leader's problem of maintaining firm or absolute control over aⁿ his/her followers. This analysis is consistent with Simmel's (1950:87-177) analysis of the effect of group size on internal relations within the group. Involvement in large groups is more likely to be segmental in nature rather than incorporating members' total personalities, and this, in itself, will make it less likely that they will become completely dependent on the group. This effect must be balanced against the fact that large groups are perhaps more able to procure resources to meet a wide range of needs for those members who prefer extensive involvement in the group.

One way the leader can attempt to cope with the precariousness of his/her position in a large and growing group is *to delegate authority to trusted close associates* of long standing who can assist in maintaining control over newer members. However, this strategy of sharing power carries with it the risk that some of the leader's power may be diluted and lost. If the leader's lieutenants are successful, some members' loyalty could be divided, and the original leader would no longer hold absolute sway over the group. This risk is consistent with Simmel's (1950:197-206) observation that absolute despotic control is more likely associated with the "leveling" of subordinates than with their hierarchical grading.

Relations with the society at large also present certain dilemmas. Sects and cults almost always exist in some degree of tension with the surrounding society, an opposition on which the very existence of the group is based (Yinger, 1961). If the group wishes to promote social change in the wider society, it must *establish contact with its representatives.* Such contacts can have two effects. First, opening lines of communication with nonmembers can create bonds which decrease the tension between the group and the wider society, thereby undermining one of the justifications for the group's existence. Such a pattern would most likely result if the representatives of the wider society attempt to coopt the group. Second, if the group leader establishes contact with society's leaders, this provides a basis for comparison of hisher power with theirs. If the leaders contacted have well established or growing reputations, the sectarian or cultic leader may feel that his/her own power and authority is rather limited and insignificant by comparison. Perhaps, too, the cooptation process itself would make the leader aware of hisher own growing dependence on others even more influential and powerful (Homans, 1961:232-64; Thibaut and Kelley, 1959:21-4).

Regardless of the type of contacts established with the wider society, the general level of tolerance toward sects and cults in the society at large is also relevant. The opposition of society is often a major reinforcement for the internal cohesiveness and solidarity of the group, justifying its own opposition to, or withdrawal from, society (Simmel, 1955:96-98; Coser, 1956:87-95). But if the wider society should be indifferent or tolerant, this very tolerance could prove fatal to the internal solidarity and cohesiveness of the group. In effect, deviant or radical sects or cults are vulnerable to being killed or drastically modified by society's tolerance. By the same token, if the group should be successful in the long run in changing society, this would also remove one of the very foundations of its existence as an opposition group.

How does the charismatic leader deal with these various dilemmas raised by the group's relation to the wider society? How can he/she avoid the contaminating and compromising influence of the wider society? How can he/she be sure that members cut their previous social ties so that they become completely dependent on the group? One solution is *to seek an isolated environment.* Utopian communities have frequently been established in remote rural areas to avoid the temptations and social entanglements of the wider society. But social isolation or insulation does not necessarily make the leader's power less precarious. Establishing a new community in an isolated area is not an easy undertaking. It is not sufficient to listen to the leader's inspiring messages or to participate in the emotionally satisfying rituals of communal solidarity. Rather, hard work and discipline are required to insure survival. Physical energy must be expended in obtaining food and shelter and other necessities. Internal disagreements must be resolved. These pressures, coupled with the increasing social friction which results from intimate day-by-day contact, will undoubtedly take their toll on members' enthusiasm and commitment and may tempt some of them to give up their efforts, especially since their isolation reduces drastically the possibility for direct opposition from the wider society.

To deal with these kinds of problems the leader must become more of an instrumental task leader rather than primarily a socioemotional leader. And task leadership is much more likely than socioemotional leadership to stimulate negative feelings toward the leader (Thibaut and Kelley, 1959:273-86; Bales and Slater, 1956:259-306). Certainly the leader's charismatic qualities would be difficult to maintain if he/she must get involved in such mundane matters as deciding what time the group members should get up in the morning or whose turn it is to wash dishes or dispose of the garbage.

This is not to say that the leader's charisma will necessarily be lost, for he/she may develop new ways to demonstrate it. Two such methods can be identified. First, the charismatic leader may gradually *modify or strengthen the ideology which justifies the group's existence, its goals, and its strategies.* Part of this justification may include a reinterpretation and exaggeration of the hostility of the wider society. In their isolated environment, the leader may be able to convince the members that they would have no chance of surviving in the wider society and that their only hope for a satisfying life is to insure the success of their own community. Because of the isolation, no contradictory evidence would be available, and the group may develop an unshaken paranoid belief that returning to society would be extremely hazardous.

A second strategy is for the leader *to establish a sharp break between necessary task activities and socioemotional activities focused on the internal relations and members' motivation, and to intensify the latter.* Activities could be developed to repair the damage done to the internal relations of the group during task performance and to reinforce members' motivations to the group in spite of the high costs and hard work involved. Marathon group encounter sessions might be used. Or the leader could *develop special rituals which reaffirm or express in dramatic form the commitment of members* to the group and to the cause it represents, as well as to its charismatic leader. Since the leader would serve as the central figure in such rituals, members'

expressions of loyalty to the group and its cause could readily be translated into loyalty to the leader. This use of ritual is consistent with Collins' (1975:56-89) analysis of ritual as a dramatic enactment of the stratification system. Through rituals, people express symbolically their positions of dominance or subordination in the social structure.

Participation in rituals can be a rather ambiguous expression of loyalty and subordination, however. It is possible to participate without sincerity, and as many military sergeants and front-line supervisors must suspect, the polite deference exhibited by subordinates is often followed by covert expressions of detachment or disdain. Thus the challenge for a charismatic leader is *to insure that the rituals are so dramatic and overpowering in their emotional effects that it would be difficult to stage them without sincerity.* The most effective rituals are those which transform a reluctant or ambiguous commitment into an enthusiastic or absolute loyalty, the emotional and motivational effects of which will carry over into all aspects of life.

For a religious group, ritual expression of the theme of submitting one's entire life to transcendental values and goals is well established. Our religious heritage includes as a continuing theme the notion that this earthly life is not the most important phase of our existence, and that there are some values for which even the sacrifice of this earthly life is not inappropriate. Leaders of groups which claim this heritage could hardly express more dramatically their demands for total commitment than to require members to indicate in ritual form their willingness to lay down their very lives for the cause. Moreover, in view of the many sacrifices the members may have already made, the basic principle of cognitive consistency would imply that they could hardly reject out of hand the possibility for such a heroic climax to their lives.

Fortunately, however, most charismatically led groups do not reach this ultimate climax except in rituals. The People's Temple in Jonestown, Guyana, under the charismatic leadership of Rev. Jim Jones, was an exception. In the next section the theoretical model of charismatic leadership developed above will be used to interpret the social dynamics involved in the evolution of the People's Temple and its culmination in the mass suicide of its members following the murder of Congressman Ryan.

Rev. Jim Jones and the People's Temple

The experience of the People's Temple can not be used to establish conclusive proof of the model of charismatic leadership outlined above. Although the events following the murder of Congressman Ryan have been widely reported, our overall knowledge of the People's Temple is rather meager. In particular, we know little of the specific personality patterns of those involved and the specific interactional dynamics which had emerged between the cult members and Jones. Nor can we ever know whether the crucial decisions made by Jones follow from the kind of motivations suggested by the theoretical model. At best, our model of charismatic leadership can provide us with a basis for *ex post facto* interpretation.

From near the beginning of Jones' career, it appears that his leadership style had the effect, whether consciously intended or not, of *creating dependency relations in his followers.* In his Indianapolis days he attracted followers by providing free food and help in finding jobs (*Time,* December 4, 1978:22). Such largesse would only be attractive to those who are deprived, and its effect on the deprived would be to make them dependent on Jones. Eventually, the creation and maintenance of dependency relations was strengthened by requiring members to contribute most of their financial resources to the group. Jones evidently went to extreme steps in his efforts to insure that members sever their ties with the outside and become completely dependent on the group. Even within the group, family ties between husbands, wives and children were disrupted (Kilduff and Javers, 1978:53-57). Also, it was reported that some members were required to sign statements admitting

various crimes which they had not committed, which could be used to blackmail them to prevent their defection (*U.S. News and World Report,* December 4, 1978:27-8; Kilduff and Javers, 1978:65). Jones also went to great lengths to insure that such loyalty was justified. Not only did he make fantastic claims regarding his own identity as the reincarnation of Jesus Christ or as God, but he managed to stage fake miracles, using rotting chicken livers that he pretended were cancerous tissue removed miraculously from patients (*Time,* December 4, 1978:17; Kilduff and Javers, 1978:65-67).

Jones' message was not widely welcomed in conservative Indianapolis, where his career was launched. His biracial policies and healing services were criticized, and Jones undoubtedly was correct in perceiving that the further expansion of his career would require relocation. Eventually, Jones and several followers moved to California, the social climate of which is widely known for its tolerance. The policy Jones pursued there was that of *promoting organizational growth and political involvement,* and he evidently was successful. The organization was sufficiently large that over 600 were bussed to Washington in 1973 and to a political rally led by Rosalynn Carter in 1976 (*Time,* December 4, 1978:22,27). Jones also succeeded in establishing contact with a number of political figures, including not only Rosalynn Carter, but also California Governor Jerry Brown, San Francisco Mayor George Moscone, and Vice-Presidential candidate Walter Mondale.

In spite of these contacts with important political figures, however, Jones himself did not acquire major political power outside his own organization. Although he was appointed to the San Francisco housing commission, he certainly was not in a position to see himself as equal to the various political figures whose paths he crossed. His power was confined largely to the People's Temple, and his outside involvement consisted primarily of delivering crowds for political events and of letter-writing campaigns (Kilduff and Javers, 1978:69-74). Moreover, the rapid growth in the size of the People's Temple during this time, as suggested above, may have been accompanied by a growing sense on Jones' part of losing absolute control over the Temple's members. Pardoxically, this loss of absolute control over his own organization was occurring at the very time that he was involved with political figures whose growing prominence far overshadowed his own. In spite of Jones' success, he felt it necessary to resort to more and more drastic measures to assert his power, even to the point of using physical coercion to keep his followers in line (Kilduff and Javers, 1978:63-5). In short, we suggest that Jones' *success in California was coupled with a growing frustration over the precariousness of his power.* If so, this frustration provides the immediate background for the decision to migrate to Guyana. A major step of this type would not have been taken lightly, and probably would not have been taken at all if Jones had been satisfied with his success.

Jones perhaps felt that he would build on his success by moving to a smaller and more isolated country where he could establish a self-contained and self-sufficient community in which his power would not be overshadowed by other political figures as it had been in San Francisco. Moreover, there would not be the "contaminating" influence of the surrounding society with its indifference or opposition, nor would his followers be distracted by the pull of social involvements outside the group. Rather, the group members would be more dependent than ever on the group and its leader. And if, as Jones apparently believed, the Guyanese government was supportive of his goal to establish a socialist commune, this would further augment his power. In short, an isolated environment may well have seemed attractive to Jones because it would eliminate the various threats to his power he had experienced in San Francisco.

Unfortunately, however, *migration to an isolated environment* could not provide the reinforcement for Jones' power which he sought. As noted earlier, sectarian and other types of opposition groups thrive on the opposition of the wider society. In an isolated environment, this opposition disappears. Just as a figure on a ground loses its distinctive-

ness if the ground were eliminated, so the distinctiveness of the beliefs, values and life-style of a sectarian organization are lost if the contrast with the wider society is eliminated. In addition, the day-by-day strains of living together in an isolated community undoubtedly helped to wear away some of the idealistic enthusiasm which characterizes utopian groups in their early days. Related to this is the fact that a lot of hard work was required merely to survive in a primitive wilderness environment. The result was that Jones had to become more of an instrumental leader, directing and coordinating tasks requiring physical energy, thus making his charisma more difficult to sustain.

But Jones could not be satisfied merely to direct his communal enterprise in an instrumental sense. Being an instrumental leader does not necessarily imply emotional commitment on the part of followers and thus is not as rewarding to the leader. To maintain emotional enthusiasm it would be necessary for the leader to develop appropriate rituals which both stimulate and express the members' total commitment to their shared cause and to their leader. Closely related to this emotional level, the leader would need *to develop an ideology* which explains and justifies the group's existence and the cause for which its members are asked to sacrifice so much. In the isolation of the Guyanese environment, it would certainly have been possible for Jones to promote exaggerated or paranoid beliefs regarding the hostility and hopelessness of the United States as a way of providing continued justification for the group's migration decision. The group's isolation meant that no contradictory evidence was readily available to counteract these exaggerated beliefs.

It is in this light that the mass suicide in Guyana can perhaps be better understood. According to a news report, the idea of collective suicide was first discussed while the group was still in California, following the defection of eight members (*Time,* December 11, 1978:35). According to Kilduff and Javers, a fake suicide ritual was used initially in San Francisco with the Temple's "planning commission" (Kilduff and Javers, 1978:62). On that occasion each person was asked to drink a glass of wine (even though alcoholic beverages were forbidden) *before* being told that it was poison. It was not, of course, but *the idea of suicide rituals was thereby born and subsequently used on other occasions when Jones felt the need for members to demonstrate their loyalty.*

We do not know whether Jones seriously contemplated the fake suicide rituals as a rehearsal for an eventual real suicide. If such rituals were conducted on several occasions, the meaning they probably acquired was simply that of a ritualistic expression of total commitment. Probably most members did not see real suicide as a very likely event. But whether actual suicide was ever contemplated or not, such rituals served to desensitize members to the possibility of actual suicide, making them less likely to resist should actual suicide ever be demanded.

The visit of Congressman Ryan at Jonestown undoubtedly precipitated a crisis for the People's Temple and its leader. Although the group managed to put up a good front for a while, it was clear that some members were interested in returning to the United States. Such developments were clearly a threat to Jones' leadership and underscored once again its precariousness. The murder of Congressman Ryan created a different kind of crisis. Jones and many members of the People's Temple may have felt that reprisals from the U.S. government would be sure to follow. If paranoid beliefs in the hostility of the United States had already been developed as *ex post facto* rationalizations for the group's migration, such expectations of reprisal against the entire community may have seemed quite feasible. Thus, both Jones and his followers may have feared that the murder of Congressman Ryan would soon lead to the destruction of their dreams for a utopian community and of their achievements thus far. In their minds, the sacrifices they had already made with their lives must surely have warranted a more fitting climax than being killed by the U.S. in retaliation for Congressman Ryan's murder.

But in the end, Jones' leadership position was still precarious. He was not convinced that

his followers would die with dignity as heroes rather than seek some other alternative out of their predicament. This can be the only explanation for the armed guards standing by to enforce his order. The tragic choice faced by the People's Temple members may therefore not have been whether to drink the poison punch and die, or refuse and live. Rather, the only choice they may have perceived was the choice of how to die: by the cyanide in the punch, by actions of the U.S. government in retaliation for the murder of a U.S. Congressman, or by fellow-members of the People's Temple who were standing by as armed guards to insure that Jones' final leadership decision was carried out.

Summary and Conclusion

In this paper we proposed a theoretical model of strategies of charismatic leadership which was then used to develop an *ex post facto* interpretation of the social dynamics of Jim Jones' People's Temple, which culminated in the mass suicide of its members in Jonestown, Guyana. The central feature of the model proposed is that charismatic leaders are extremely vulnerable to erosion of their outstanding claims and to consequent loss of their influence. Just as leaders in other institutional contexts, charismatic leaders seek ways to reinforce their power and to overcome its precariousness.

We examined several specific strategies used by charismatic leaders to reinforce their position of power: recruiting among deprived segments of society, providing various benefits to members so as to establish dependency relations on their part, requiring members to sever ties outside the group and to contribute all their resources to the group, attempting to expand their influence by delegating authority, promoting organizational growth, establishing contact with prominent political leaders, seeking an isolated environment, developing an ideology to justify members' total commitment to the group and its cause, and creating rituals to symbolize and reinforce this commitment. The social dynamics of the People's Temple were interpreted as reflecting Jones' efforts to use these various strategies.

These strategies have paradoxical consequences, however. In certain respects they may succeed in enhancing the leader's power. In other respects, however, even if they succeed, they also have additional consequences which partially undermine it. The leader is thus unable to escape the precariousness of his power.

This model of the evolution of the People's Temple and its culmination in the tragedy of mass suicides at Jonestown differs sharply from those interpretations that stress the psychopathological characteristics of the leader and his followers or the social deficiencies of the environment from which they come. The two approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The social dynamics analyzed here may apply to groups whose members or leader are suffering from psychological or social psychological disturbances. However, the social dynamics implied by our theoretical model are not limited to such groups. Rather, the processes exhibited in sects or cults are essentially normal sociological processes reflecting understandable motivations which occur frequently in "normal" contexts. Unfortunately, such processes can lead to tragic outcomes, as the events in Jonestown demonstrate. The question of what kinds of social control mechanisms operate to prevent such tragedies from occurring more frequently merits further study.

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