

Rituals of Exclusion and the Jonestown Dead

David Chidester

They shall not be lamented, nor shall they be buried; they shall be as dung on the surface of the ground.

Jeremiah 16:4

[T]heir inferiority is continued to the very confines of the other world. When the Negro dies, his bones are cast aside, and the distinction of condition prevails even in the equality of death.

Alexis de Tocqueville (I:374)

[D]eath will be eternal, because society will always maintain towards these accursed individuals the attitude of exclusion that it adopted from the first.

Robert Hertz (86)

MY EPIGRAPHS SPEAK of the ritual exclusion of the dead, but they do not all speak with the same voice. The first speaks from within a social order that is perceived to have been violated by impurity, by an abomination destroying both land and the people of the land. It is a statement of exclusion announced from within a system of purity and order. The other two are statements by outside observers, two French sociologists who were particularly acute cultural analysts of the dynamics of social inclusion and exclusion. Alexis de Tocqueville observed the emerging social order of the American nation during his tour of 1831-32, noticing the operative racial classification of persons in that society, classifications that were by no means neutral, but which resulted in the effective exclusion of an entire class of persons from full participation in the American network of social relations in life as well as in death. The subclassification of blacks in America, Tocqueville noted, was also enacted in funerary rituals of exclusion. Sociologist, student of Durkheim, and casualty of the trenches in the Great War, Robert Hertz was a brilliant and penetrating observer of ethnographic evidence of mortuary ritual. In his 1907 article on cross-cultural collective representations of

David Chidester is Associate Professor of Religion at University of Cape Town, Private Bag Rondebosch 7700, Africa.

death, Hertz concentrated on social cohesion, on the ritual mechanisms for the reconstruction of social relations sundered by death, but he could not help noticing rituals of exclusion. Hertz based his analysis primarily on available ethnographic reports of the Ngaju Dyak of Southern Borneo. Half a century later, another observer would confirm their practice of ritual exclusion. Hans Schärer reported that the Ngaju Dyak held slaves who had no genealogy of ancestors and no hope of any life to come in the village of the dead. Cut off from a fully human past and any expectation of a fully human life after death, these slaves were "buried without ceremony," Schärer noted, "far outside in the bush or the forest" (44). Although he focused his analysis on the Ngaju Dyak, Hertz recognized that ritual practices of inclusion and exclusion in funerary ritual had wider, perhaps universal, provenance in human societies. In life and in death a society may be constituted by a dialectic of ritual inclusion and exclusion.

The fragile network of interlocking interpersonal relations that holds any society of human beings together is inevitably disrupted by death. Since society is an abstraction for that network of relations, there is an important sense in which a society itself is threatened with dissolution at the death of any of its members. This threat of dissolution may be more apparent in small-scale societies woven together out of kinship relations, shared ritual practices, and intricate bonds of obligation among persons than in large-scale, mass societies that often are unified simply by virtue of occupying the same geographical territory. Even such mass aggregations of human beings, however, may be subtly, yet seriously disrupted by the event of death. Ritual, or, more specifically, funerary ritual, is one cultural medium through which a society may reconstitute itself as a relatively unified whole in response to the possibility of its own dissolution in death. Funerary ritual involves specific practices that mend the rent fabric, restore the broken connections, and renew the social contract between the living and the dead. The nature of that contract was specified by one of the most perceptive analysts of the symbolic order of American life, W. Lloyd Warner, when he observed that funerary ritual stands as a "visible symbol of the agreement among men that they will not let each other die" (1959:285). Death breaks, but ritual remakes that agreement. Death rituals, therefore, may be understood as practices made necessary by the possibility that any network of social relations may be dissolved by death.

The deaths of 913 Americans on 18 November 1978 at the Peoples Temple Agricultural Cooperative, a community better known as Jonestown, in the remote jungles of Guyana, symbolized precisely such a pos-

sibility—the possibility of the dissolution of American society. This must certainly appear to be an exaggerated claim. But I would argue that the serious disruption of the symbolic order of American society represented by the Jonestown mass murder-suicide, perhaps symbolizing the possibility of America's own impossibility, was reflected in the types of ritual practices that were exercised on the Jonestown dead. If ritual practices do, in fact, provide some kind of a key to the nature of social relations, then the ritual disposition of the Jonestown dead revealed something important about the ways in which those relations in American society may be constituted and reconstituted in the face of death. As we pass the tenth anniversary of the Jonestown event, an event that crystallized in the American popular imagination as a vivid emblem of an unimaginable, horrifying mixture of deviance, terror, and violence, it may be instructive to look back at the ways in which that event was received, not simply in the sensationalized media reports, the strategic distancing, and impassioned disavowals that proliferated in the wake of the event, but in the specific ritual practices that attended the final disposition of the Jonestown dead.¹

RITUALS OF EXCLUSION: DOVER, DELAWARE

The bodies began to arrive at the United States Air Force Base in Dover, Delaware, in the early dawn of 23 November 1978. The first C-141 Starlifter made the five-hour flight from Georgetown, Guyana, to Dover carrying a cargo of forty bodies. The bodies had been placed in rubberized bags where they had been discovered in the Guyanese jungle and then transferred to aluminum cases in Georgetown for shipment to Dover. No one wanted these bodies, the remains of Jonestown. On behalf of the United States government, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance had requested that they be buried where they were found in the jungle in a mass grave. The Guyanese government, however, insisted that Jonestown was an American problem. Prime Minister Forbes Burnham demanded that the bodies be removed from Guyana as soon as possible. So the military operation of transporting the bodies of 913 Americans back to the United States began with their exclusion from burial in

¹ The discussion that follows presumes a basic familiarity with the story of Jonestown, particularly with the end of the community in a mass murder-suicide occasioned by the visit of Congressman Leo Ryan, news reporters, and former members in November 1978. The discipline of religious studies has been negligent in its analysis of this event, a negligence noted by Smith (1982). I have tried to make a contribution to rectifying this situation in Chidester (1988a).

Guyana, the place they had adopted as their home, their "Promised Land" of freedom from an American society that they had experienced as oppressive and from which they had experienced themselves excluded. Excluded in life, they were ritually excluded in death.

The Dover Air Force Base was familiar with handling death on a large scale. Dover had received a large share of the bodies of deceased U.S. servicemen during the Vietnam War. Over 21,000 casualties of that war had been returned to the United States through Dover to be reincorporated through the military rituals of the sanctified sacrificial dead, however much those rituals seemed to lose their cogency during an unpopular war in a divided society. Nevertheless, those sacrifices on the battlefield might still be perceived as redemptive; the Jonestown sacrifices could not be so easily assimilated into such a cult of the dead. Dover had also been the receiving point for 326 bodies from an April 1977 crash of Pan Am and KLM 747 aircraft in the Canary Islands. A team of experts worked three weeks to prepare, embalm, and identify the dead for burial. They were left with 114 unidentified bodies that were eventually buried with appropriate ceremony in numbered graves in Southern California. Those deaths were accidental, but the Jonestown deaths appeared to be incomprehensibly intentional. The Dover Air Force Base was accustomed to handling the preliminary rituals of death on a large scale, but nothing prepared its staff, volunteers, and the surrounding community for the shock of receiving 913 corpses from the mass murder-suicide of the Jonestown community. These were bodies no one wanted. Suddenly, they were in American space.

After the difficulties of transporting, treating, and storing these bodies, the crucial problem was one of identification. The Dover Air Force Base received bodies in bags and names on a list. The difficulties in correlating those two sets of symbols were almost insurmountable. The bagged bodies were unnamed, unknown, and almost non-human. Twelve regular mortuary personnel, eighteen F.B.I. agents, twenty-nine members of the Army Graves Registration Unit from Fort Lee, Virginia, a thirty-five member Air Force pathology team, and sixty base volunteers were engaged in processing the bodies in what was described as an "assembly-line job." As reported on 29 November 1978 in the *Wilmington, Delaware, Morning News*, one airman described the confusion of categories in his encounter with the Jonestown dead. "It's just an unintelligible mess," he said. "You can't tell white or black. . . . You can't tell facial features at all." The distinctive features felt to make humans intelligible as human beings had disappeared. Facial features, race, and age had been dissolved in death. Certainly, one of the ironies

of this dehumanization of the dead from the Jonestown community was that shared aspirations of the Peoples Temple for overcoming racism, sexism, ageism, and classism were in one sense achieved in the depersonalized mask of death. All the bodies had become black. Even white bodies (about 25 percent of the total) had become black, apparently as an effect of the cyanide; however, by another irony, the body of Jim Jones had remained recognizably white because Jones had died of a gunshot wound to the head. Betrayed by his body in death, Jim Jones, as surviving member Odell Rhodes later recalled, had "turned into what he hated most. He was white. To me, he looked about the whitest thing I ever saw" (Feinsod:211). The rest of the bodies, however, had dissolved the distinctions of race against which the Peoples Temple had struggled throughout its history in the equality of condition represented by human death and decomposition.

The airman cited by the Wilmington *Morning News* proceeded to explain the psychological adjustment necessary for working with these indistinguishable corpses, which could no longer appear as intelligible within normal, ordinary classifications of human persons: "You just have to psyche yourself into not thinking about it as a person, but just something that's broken down. If you start thinking about it as a person, you get yourself mentally involved and that's not good." This "thingification" of the Jonestown dead was an important strategy for dealing with the routine procedures of disinfecting, preparing, and embalming such severely decomposed corpses. These were not human persons, but machines that had broken down. Perhaps this strategy was not unique to the disposition of the Jonestown dead, since it appears more generally in medical practice and the medicalization of death in American society. Yet it is a strategy that is implicit in shared classifications of the otherness of other persons as thing-like machines, robots, or automatons. In the last few years of the Peoples Temple's history, both Temple opponents and loyalists frequently resorted to calling each other robots in order to invalidate the fully human status of the other. In handling these 913 faceless, nameless, and essentially nonhuman bodies, Air Force personnel and volunteers found themselves on the frontline of a classification of otherness that was adumbrated, expanded, and enacted in the larger context of American responses to the Jonestown dead.

The violation of American space by the Jonestown dead clearly registered in the dialectic of purity and danger. Language employed in the popular media to describe the otherness of these bodies was thoroughly imbued with imagery of defilement. A story circulating in Delaware,

and recorded 7 December 1978 in the *State News*, related the experience of a young woman who was working the detail assigned to incinerate the empty body bags. As she was lifting one bag in order to hurl it into the incinerator, the bag suddenly burst over her uniform. A staff writer for the *State News* recounted: "The bag had been disinfected but once contained all sorts of little creepy, crawly things." This incident simply hints at the vocabulary of defilement, impurity, and contagion within which these bodies began to appear in the popular imagination. In this particular instance, the young woman was praised for her quick wit in tearing off her uniform and burning it in the incinerator. The dangers of defilement were countered by chemical disinfectants, using, according to one mortician's account, ten times the ordinary amounts of chemicals to treat the bodies. Fear of contagion from contact with the Jonestown dead, however, was not limited to medical notions of hygiene. The deceased immediately came to represent a more fundamental, and dangerous, defilement of American territory.

On 6 December 1978 the *New York Times* reported some of the difficulties encountered in arriving at a final, satisfactory disposition of the Jonestown dead. At that point, there were no death certificates for any of the over 900 "cultists" who had died in Guyana. Identifying the time, place, and cause of death, death certificates have functioned as an important element in American rituals of the dead. Locating death in this way brings it, to a certain extent, within human control and allows for a fully human disposition of the dead to proceed. The state of Delaware used this bureaucratic, yet potentially symbolic procedure, to block any burial of the Jonestown dead within the territory of Delaware. The position taken by the governor and state legislature of Delaware was that identified and claimed bodies could be removed from the Dover Air Force Base, but not buried within Delaware without an acceptable death certificate, while unidentified and unclaimed bodies could not be removed from the Air Force Base. Legal restrictions covering the Jonestown bodies reflected the difficult and ambiguous position of the state. State officials insisted that the bodies should be removed from Delaware as quickly as possible, but they would not release unidentified and unclaimed bodies from the Air Force Base for fear that they might be buried individually, or in a mass grave, on Delaware territory. The mayor of Dover, Charles A. Legates, Jr., was recorded 29 November 1978 in the Wilmington, Delaware, *Morning News* as proposing that the unidentified bodies be cremated and their ashes scattered at sea "beyond the continental limits of the United States." The ashes could be put back aboard one of the C-141 Starlifters that brought the bodies

to Dover in the first place, carried out to sea, and released with a "very compassionate ceremony." The primary concern in this recommendation, however, seemed to be less with compassion than with an appropriate ceremony of exclusion that would effectively prevent these remains from defiling the territory of Dover, Delaware, or the continental United States.

With the bodies still in storage on 22 December 1978, the Wilmington *Morning News* quoted Delaware congressional representative Thomas B. Evans at a press conference in Washington, D.C., confirming the state's position on the exclusion of the Jonestown dead. "Most Delawareans feel rather strongly that [their state] is not a proper resting place," Evans announced. "Delaware residents were not involved in Guyana and Delaware should not have to bear the burden of this problem." But what was the burden of the problem posed by the Jonestown dead? Certainly there may have been financial liabilities in their disposition that state officials would not want placed upon Delaware taxpayers. But the suggestion by Representative Evans that the bodies should be airlifted to California in order to lift the burden of the Jonestown dead from Delaware was part of a larger symbolic context in which the presence of these bodies on Delaware soil was perceived as a dangerous and defiling contagion.

That contagion was feared on at least three overlapping levels. First, the bodies inspired fear in the popular imagination that the remains would contaminate the ground. As reported 10 December 1978 in the *State News*, one of the morticians at the Dover Air Force Base noted that "some people are even concerned that the bodies might contaminate the ground where they are eventually interred." This mortician tried to reassure the public that "there is absolutely no possibility of this," yet the fear of the decomposed bodies polluting the earth, creating serious dangers to public health, persisted in the public perception of the dangers involved in the disposition of the Jonestown dead.

Second, the concern for public health was duplicated in the concern for public order reflected in the fear that the Jonestown dead might violate the purity of Delaware social space. Several Delaware state officials expressed the fear that the burial of 274 unidentified bodies, and as many as 328 identified, but unclaimed bodies, in a mass grave in the state of Delaware would become a focal point for dangerous cult activities that would disrupt social order. A State Department memorandum dated 29 November 1978 described the resistance on the part of local Delaware officials to a mass burial of the unclaimed Jonestown dead within their state: "The fear has been expressed that such a 'mass' grave

would serve as a drawing point for annual or periodic meetings of the Peoples Temple or other 'undesirable' cults or groups." Legates, Dover's mayor, was particularly adamant about the dangers of any mass burial site for the Jonestown dead. He was quoted in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* insisting that "this would inundate Dover with people who are not quite, if you'll pardon the expression, all there." The mayor feared that the grave site would become a "shrine or mecca for remaining cult members or other cult worshipers." Mayor Legates expressed what must have been a common sentiment among his constituency in declaring, "I don't need a bunch of weirdos here in Dover." Fear of dangers to public health were matched, therefore, by a fear that the burial of these bodies within the state of Delaware would present a danger to public order. Delaware would be in danger of invasion by both disease and deviants if it allowed such burials on its sacred soil. Hygienic and social purity could only be preserved by exclusion of the Jonestown dead.

Third, there was a perception reflected in local Delaware newspapers that any burial of the Jonestown dead in Delaware soil might present spiritual dangers to the inhabitants of the state. An article of 22 December 1978 in the *Wilmington Morning News* by columnist Bill Frank gave dire warnings of the demonic spirits in torment that had been reported in the general vicinity of the Dover Air Force Base. "They'd better get those Jonestown dead out of Delaware territory and have them buried elsewhere," he warned, "or there will be dire consequences." Frank pursued his theme of the demonic dead:

Already the necromancers are beginning to develop weird stories about the restless spirits of the Jonestown dead flitting around St. Jones Neck in Kent County. Strange stories are filtering up here about shadows being spotted in the vicinity of Lebanon, Voshell's Pond and even over into the Bombay Hook country. Those chilling noises on moonlit nights are not the honking of geese but allegedly the turbulent spirits of the Jonestown dead, crying out for bell, book, and candle.

The spiritual dangers posed by these unnamed, unclaimed, and non-human dead were expressed in terms of demonology, witchcraft, and the restless spirits of the unburied dead. Such language was certainly not intended to be taken too seriously, but the serious assumption that the Jonestown dead were somehow not authentic, fully human dead was reinforced by the insistence of this particular columnist, echoing the statements of state officials, that the appropriate response to these dead was exclusion. The column concluded: "What Delaware doesn't want are those bodies here any longer; certainly no burials on Delaware soil;

definitely no bodies in our Potters Fields, and positively no ashes strewn around on Delaware soil." Perceived dangers of defilement presented by the bodies of Jonestown—hygienic, social, and ultimately spiritual dangers—were all viewed as violations of the sacred space of the state of Delaware. The sanctity of that space could only be preserved by exercising rituals of exclusion on those bodies, ritual exclusion that would simultaneously remove them from that sacred space and effectively deny the human status of the persons that had once animated those bodies.

The state of Delaware was not alone in expressing such deeply felt concerns about the dangers of the Jonestown dead and the need to protect the hygienic, social, and spiritual integrity of American space. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* recorded on 3 December 1978 that Democratic Representative from Georgia Larry McDonald had declared: "They should have dug a hole in Guyana and bulldozed the whole bunch of them in." This, of course, was precisely what the State Department initially intended. From this perspective, the bodies should never have been allowed to enter American territory in the first place. Many Americans apparently shared this sentiment. A remarkable letter to the State Department written by a medical doctor from West Virginia on 23 January 1979 echoed concerns about American sacred space and expressed a common, intense aversion to what were perceived as deviant, quasi-religious movements threatening that space. The author of this letter began by registering his shock at reading in a Charleston newspaper that considerations were underway for the burial of the Jonestown dead in West Virginia. "As a lifelong resident of West Virginia," he stated, "I do not feel that this is a practical solution to contaminate the hills of West Virginia with such a mass suicidal group." Again, fears of defilement were replicated in fears of social disruption. "More than likely," the author warned, "some of the kooks will want to set up a Temple or a Shrine close to the burial site in West Virginia, and we have enough of these quasi religious Hara-Krista [sic] and other religious groups in West Virginia." The contamination referred to in this letter figured the popular perception that a mass burial of unidentified and unclaimed Jonestown dead would violate the hygienic, social, and spiritual purity of America. These overlapping regions of purity could only be protected by a ritual of exclusion that would eliminate all danger of contamination. The author of this particular letter proposed burial at sea as the most feasible solution to the problem of the disposition of the Jonestown dead. "This is a wonderful burial rite and ceremony," he concluded, "and, of course, we will not contaminate the land mass of the

United States with any other quasi religious temples” (Moore; document 2306).

State Department files also include numerous letters from citizens and congressional representatives expressing outrage at the expenditure of tax monies on the retrieval and disposition of the Jonestown dead. The figure most often cited was \$9 million, but the State Department insisted that expenditures were about half that amount. Again, the issue was more than simply a matter of money. In paying for the disposition of the bodies, the government seemed to be acknowledging that the Jonestown dead somehow belonged to America. There was considerable resistance on the part of many taxpayers to such a public acknowledgment. One letter to the editors of the *Delaware News*, 7 December 1978, expressed a sentiment that was rare in the controversy surrounding the disposition of the Jonestown dead by suggesting that these bodies did in fact belong to America. The author of this letter wrote: “900 of our people went astray, and like lost sheep are being brought back home. Because America believes in the honor of life, our dead are loved too. We honor our dead because we honor life.” The exceptional nature of this affirmation—claiming these dead as American dead, as “our” dead—is set in relief by the fact that most responses to the presence of these bodies in American space advocated exclusion. Characteristically, most letters to the State Department objected to any United States government financial support for the operation of recovery and disposition, recommended burial at sea outside the territorial limits of the United States (or shipment of the bodies to California, which for many seemed to be roughly equivalent to sending them outside the United States), and insisted that no funeral, cemetery, or memorial should provide any opportunity for keeping alive the memory of the Jonestown dead.

The visible bodies of Jonestown were inextricably bound up in a web of symbolization that surfaced as the outlines of an invisible religion in American culture. Whether we call this a culture religion, common religion, folk religion, or civil religion, it emerged as the lineaments of a shared worldview, a worldview that was certainly already present but that surfaced with particular urgency in response to the Jonestown dead. Adapting suggestions found in the work of Robert Redfield, we might say that this worldview, like any worldview, was negotiated along at least two basic dimensions: (1) the classification of persons and (2) orientation in time and space. Negotiations over *person* and *place* constitute worldviews. In response to the Jonestown dead, America employed discursive, practical, and institutional strategies that negoti-

ated their dismissal as human persons and their exclusion from American space. Particularly in and around Dover, Delaware, the presence of the Jonestown dead within the sacred space of American society tended to be perceived as a dangerous, defiling disruption of the sense of order important to a kind of American orientation in space. But those bodies were experienced as particularly threatening to American space because the Jonestown dead defied fundamental classifications regarding what it is to be a human being in American society. Therefore, the bodies were not "ours"; they were not part of "us"; they were not to be included in the ritual recognition accorded to fully human dead in the American cult of the dead. This classification of the radical otherness of the Jonestown dead was clearly evident in the rituals of exclusion proposed to deal with the disposition of the bodies. But perhaps the clearest example of ritual exclusion appeared in the inexplicable cremation of the body of Jim Jones on Tuesday, 21 December 1978. His body was taken to Eglinton Cemetery in Clarksboro, New Jersey, outside of the territory of Delaware, cremated, as the Delaware *State News* reported, "without ceremony," and then returned to be stored with the other unclaimed bodies at the Dover Air Force Base. Without any supporting ritual that would claim and reincorporate the deceased into the human community, this cremation was simply an exercise in symbolic elimination. Eventually, the ashes of Jones and his immediate family who died at Jonestown would be scattered over the Atlantic by request of his surviving family in Indiana. But that final symbolic elimination would simply complete the ritual of exclusion that had been practiced earlier by singling out the body of Jim Jones from all the rest that were stored at the Dover Air Force Base for a special cremation.

DEATH RITUALS OF INCLUSION: SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

All America, however, was not Dover, Delaware. Another city had a very different interest in the Jonestown dead. San Francisco had been intimately implicated in the life of Peoples Temple; it would also be involved in the disposition of the Jonestown dead. The controversy over the disposition of the bodies continued through December 1978 and into January of 1979. The state of Delaware remained firm in its refusal to allow burials in its territory. The boundaries of that territorial space were carefully protected by the institutionalized medico-legal discourse of bureaucratic investigations, procedures, and permits. The Delaware

Department of Health and Social Services reiterated the state's position in a statement of 16 January 1979:

For about six weeks now, we have been trying to make it clear to the State Department representatives that Delaware laws make it virtually impossible for us to permit the burial or cremation of the Guyana victims in Delaware. The die was cast when the State and Defense Departments removed the remains from Guyana without appropriate medicolegal investigations of the cause and manner of death. Since the investigation was not undertaken in Guyana and since the remains were embalmed here without appropriate investigations, we cannot issue the necessary burial or cremation permits in Delaware (Moore: document 2014).

At this point, over six hundred bodies remained in storage at Dover Air Force Base. Finally, death certificates were provided by the Guyanese government, but final disposition was still delayed. While hearing proceedings on the dissolution of Peoples Temple property, a California Superior Court issued a court order for the formation of a "Guyana Emergency Committee" to be charged with the task of drawing up a plan for the disposition of the Jonestown dead. This committee was designed as an inter-faith forum comprised of religious officials from the San Francisco Council of Churches, Archdiocese of the Roman Catholic Church, and Board of Rabbis. As an ecumenical, religiojudicial commission based in San Francisco, the Guyana Emergency Committee seemed to represent the kind of tri-faith, interreligious cooperation that the sociologist Will Herberg, among others, has seen as integral to a uniquely American civil religion. Protestant, Catholic, Jew—the committee summarized its recommendations on 10 February 1979 for a final disposition of the Jonestown dead that would allow for an appropriate ritual inclusion of the bodies in American space to proceed.

First, the committee recommended that the process of disposition be designed in such a way that it assisted survivors, relatives, and the local San Francisco community to release their emotional attachments to the deceased. "The concern of the religious community," the committee stated, "is that a plan be followed which will help survivors, relatives and the community to work through their grief, despair, hopelessness, fear and anger, so that all may return to a productive and meaningful life." Recognizing that the mediation of often intense emotional investments of the living in the dead may be one important function of funeral rituals, the Guyana Emergency Committee recommended a ritual disposition that would acknowledge the Jonestown dead as fully human dead. Here was a proposal for a ritual of inclusion, reincorporating the Jones-

town dead within the human community of the living and the dead. The contrast between Dover and San Francisco in this regard is important. Delaware officials, media, and public opinion advocated ritual exclusion in order to restore the integrity of a space perceived to have been violated by the presence of the Jonestown dead. But San Francisco had been more involved with the lives of the deceased. Its inter-faith committee suggested that the integrity of the San Francisco community could only be restored by an appropriate ritual of inclusion. Such a ritual would acknowledge, reclaim, and reincorporate the dead, as fully human dead, in ways that promised to mediate the emotional responses that attend a human death. The Guyana Emergency Committee insisted that "the peace and psychological health of our City depends upon it."

Second, the Guyana Emergency Committee rejected mass cremation as an appropriate disposition of the Jonestown dead. Cremation was unacceptable, the committee argued, because it was inconsistent with the traditional preference for earth burial among the black religious community. "Because most of the victims are Black," the committee noted, "we feel we must reflect the thinking of that community, which weighs extremely heavy the experience of the burial of their dead to work through their grief." Although Mayor Legates of Dover, and others, argued that cremation of the bodies and scattering their ashes over the sea would serve as an appropriate, even compassionate, ritual disposition of the Jonestown dead, the Guyana Emergency Committee recognized that cremation would be particularly offensive to black religious sensibilities. "Honoring a proper burial is crucial for these people," the committee concluded, "and cremation would only add to their despair and create an anger that could explode." In San Francisco, the danger represented by the Jonestown dead was not the presence of their bodies within the circumscribed space of sacred soil (as that danger was perceived in Dover); rather, the danger was identified in the possibility that these bodies might be violated from the vantage point of the human community that felt most closely identified with them. Only earth burial would satisfy the conditions for a ritual of inclusion on those grounds.

Finally, the Guyana Emergency Committee concluded by reiterating its recommendation that the disposition of the Jonestown dead be conducted in such a way that it contribute to the healing of the San Francisco community as a whole. "We who represent the religious community," the committee stated, "desire that the relatives and survivors of this tragedy, as well as others affected by it, continue to live in this City with as few scars as possible from this experience." As if following van Gennep's scenario for an effective *rite de passage*, the com-

mittee advocated a disposition that would support the detachment of the living from the dead, the transition of earth burial, and the reincorporation of the dead in the memory of a restored community. Practical recommendations were made—a reputable mortuary that related well with the community should be used and any commercialization of the situation should be avoided. But the primary concern of the Guyana Emergency Committee was the restoration of the San Francisco community, and all those affected by the deaths in the distant jungles of Guyana, by means of a ritual practice that would reclaim the dead as fully human dead, separated, yet still connected with the living. Through an appropriate funeral ritual of inclusion, the bodies of the Jonestown dead might be reincorporated into the human community and the emotional, social, and religious integrity of that community might be effectively restored.

Still, however, delays in the disposition of the Jonestown dead continued. On 13 March 1979, Jonestown survivor Michael Prokes called a press conference in a motel room in Modesto, California. He read from a prepared statement in which he said, “I can’t disassociate myself from the people who died, nor do I want to,” and then went into the bathroom and shot himself in the head with a .38 caliber revolver. In his remarks, Prokes observed that the ritual exclusion of the Jonestown dead had been particularly disturbing to him. “It is sadness beyond tears to think of my brothers and sisters from Jonestown,” Prokes said, “not only unidentified, but still unburied.” Through rituals of exclusion, the bodies of the Jonestown dead had no name, no place, no grave, no memory in the collective rituals of the dead practiced in American society. Ritual exclusion of these bodies seemed to parallel what Prokes perceived as the dehumanization in American society of the blacks, seniors, and poor who had constructed meaningful lives within the Peoples Temple. He was not surprised that Delaware public officials were afraid that a mass burial would turn into a cultic shrine, because such a shrine would stand as “an all too painful reminder of a tragic American failure.” Now in storage, piled “like match-boxes,” denied a final resting place, the Jonestown dead had no home. “Though I’m white,” Prokes concluded, “when I die, I belong with them” (Lane: 214-231). The ritual exclusion of the Jonestown dead seems to have significantly contributed to the last suicide of Jonestown.

Finally, the 250 unidentified and 304 identified, but unclaimed, bodies were transported from Dover to the San Francisco area in trucks during May 1979 in shipments of fifty at a time, at three day intervals, careful not to form a caravan across the continental United States that

might attract the attention, and perhaps religious observances, of “weirdos,” “kooks,” and “cult worshipers,” imagined to be out there somewhere waiting for any opportunity to turn the Jonestown dead into a focal point for American religious deviancy. Rumors that the state of Arizona would try to prevent these trucks from crossing its territory proved to be groundless. In California, identified bodies were kept thirty days in San Francisco or Los Angeles to allow family members to claim them. In the end, 378 bodies were finally interred in unmarked graves, with a simple graveside ceremony, in Oakland’s Evergreen Cemetery outside of San Francisco.

Delaware officials had feared memorials to the Jonestown dead, but memorial services have been held. They also have oscillated between inclusion and exclusion. One memorial that might be regarded as a ritual of inclusion because it affirmed the humanity of (at least) the children of Jonestown was the all-night candlelight vigil around the White House organized by author Kenneth Wooden for 18 November 1979 to protest “their bulldozed common burial.” The second anniversary on 18 November 1980 found Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish clergy conducting a service at the Oakland cemetery for about two dozen mourners (who were outnumbered by reporters). The memorial was interrupted by the unscheduled remarks of a woman who had lost 27 family members in Jonestown. “We must commit ourselves,” she said, “to ridding our communities of the hopelessness which caused so many to follow Jim Jones to Guyana, seeking a better life.” Other commemorations, however, were held to reinforce the exclusion of the Jonestown dead. The seventh anniversary of Jonestown was observed on Sunday, 17 November 1985, with what was described in the press as a “rally” of about ten people on the east steps of the U.S. Capitol. Anticult psychologist Anita Solomon took this opportunity to warn Americans about the dangers of cults and to advocate the prosecution and conviction of “leaders of destructive cults for their criminal activities that often extend beyond their dehumanizing practices.” These anticult sentiments were focused on Jonestown by Congressman Tom Lantos, representing the district that Leo Ryan had represented, when he stated that it was necessary to remember Jonestown in order “to prevent such tragedies in the future.”² Rather than serving as celebrations by “cult worshipers,”

²These accounts of Jonestown memorials are taken from “White House Protest Vigil Announced,” *The Advisor* (23 September 1979); “Jonestown Revisited . . . Lest We Forget,” *Sequoia: The Church at Work* (February–March 1981); and “Anniversary of Jonestown Observed,” *San Francisco Chronicle* (18 November 1985).

“weirdos,” or people who are “not quite all there,” memorials tended to raise the spectre of Jonestown only to exorcise it and, thereby, reinforce normative boundaries in American society.

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

The history of the disposition of the Jonestown dead is a tale of two cities: Dover and San Francisco. Both cities were disrupted by the Jonestown event, but municipal authorities in the two cities exercised very different ritual procedures in response to that disruption. Mobilizing discursive, practical, and institutional strategies of exclusion, Delaware succeeded in having the bodies excluded from burial in its sacred soil, even if it did not succeed in having the bodies cremated and their ashes scattered over the Atlantic so that American space would not be defiled. In the end, refusing burial, keeping the bodies almost six months in confinement, and eventually transporting them to California seemed to fulfill the basic conditions of ritual exclusion from the perspective of Dover. In San Francisco, however, municipal authorities and religious leaders on the tri-faith Guyana Emergency Committee outlined the conditions for a ritual of inclusion designed to restore the integrity of their community by reincorporating the bodies of the Jonestown dead. The poorly marked, forgotten mass grave, however, may stand as evidence that the final disposition of these unclaimed dead was not very successful as a ritual of reincorporation into the human community. In light of the religious, political, and ethical violation of the American social order that Jonestown came to represent, perhaps the forces against inclusion were simply too strong. In religious terms, the Jonestown dead were heretics, not only because they rejected conventional Christianity, but, perhaps more important, because they rejected the shared values of an American civil religion. In political terms, they were traitors advocating a socialist, revolutionary overthrow of the American government. In ethical terms, their suicides violated the fundamental socioethical order of the living in America. Here was an unassimilable otherness that could not be so easily reincorporated, but it could be exorcised through rituals of exclusion.

If rituals of exclusion form a genre of ritual practice, it is a type of practice that is both rite of passage and rite of crisis. As a rite of passage, ritual exclusion of the dead reverses van Gennep's formula: first, it begins with the incorporation of some unassimilable defilement, violation, or otherness; second, it assigns a liminal *paranthropoid* identity to that otherness; and, finally, it culminates in an absolute separation of the

excluded from the human community of the living and the dead. Rituals of exclusion may very well be rites of passage, but they are passages with a difference. As rites of crisis, all death rituals operate in situations of social disruption. Rituals of inclusion may generate a sense of social solidarity in response to the crisis represented by death. In his analysis of American funerary practices, W. Lloyd Warner was particularly attentive to the socially unifying nature of funerals, cemeteries, and memorials. The American cult of the dead, according to Warner, "dramatically expresses the sentiments of unity of all the living among themselves, of all the living with the dead, and of all the living and dead as a group with God" (Warner, 1959: 278-9). While such ritual inclusion may achieve a certain degree of social solidarity through techniques of reincorporation, rituals of exclusion reaffirm and reinforce a certain social order by eliminating persons classified as less than fully human from that society. Rather than reincorporation, disincorporation is the rule of ritual exclusion. While rituals of inclusion may achieve social unity in situations of crisis under the sign of a shared *similarity*, rituals of exclusion negotiate social unity under the sign of *difference*.

As both rites of passage and rites of crisis, rituals of exclusion may define a network of social relations by eliminating those persons classified as outside the circle of humanity. It has often been noted that a community's classification of persons influences the disposition of the dead. Age, gender, marital, economic, or social status may affect where and how the body of a person may be disposed. One measurement proposed as a common denominator in all these classifications is the degree of social disruption caused by a death. Due to the importance of their social ties within a community, the deaths of high-ranking individuals may disrupt a network of social relations to a greater extent than the deaths of individuals of lesser rank (Binford). It has even been suggested that there is a direct correlation between the degree of community disruption and the energy expended in the attendant funerary rituals (Tainter, 1975; 1978). However, disruption of a community may also result from actions regarded as crimes against society. Criminals, traitors, heretics, suicides, and so on may be experienced as equally disruptive as the deaths of high-ranking individuals, if not in fact more disruptive of the social order. Their deaths, as well, may be attended by specific, elaborate, and highly charged ritual practices designed, not to reincorporate them into the social fabric torn by death, but to eliminate them permanently from the human community. Rituals of exclusion often reverse the practice of inclusion: they cremate when they should bury; they bury when they should cremate. The performative impact of

such techniques is the exclusion of a disruptive social agent by means of a ritual practice that inverts the customary disposition of the dead.

At a number of points in this discussion, I have had occasion to refer to American civil religion. Certainly, the term has been given a wide variety of theoretical constructions.³ The variety has become so wide that perhaps the analytical utility of the term has been diffused. Nevertheless, whether civil religion is understood as common religion, culture religion, folk religion, popular religion, religious nationalism, or some kind of transcendent moral architecture of America, the term is almost always employed to designate the symbolic character of an inclusive unity in American society. Will Herberg located this unity in the tri-faith American way of life, while W. Lloyd Warner located it in the American cult of the dead, long before Robert Bellah identified it as "a genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in or, one could almost say, as revealed through the experience of the American people" (179). In conclusion, I would like to note some of the implications of the disposition of the Jonestown dead for our understanding of that transcendent unity in American culture.

First, civil religion may not be a sacred canopy, or an overarching umbrella, or a cohesive social glue that includes everyone. Like all religious worldviews, American civil religion defines itself by what it excludes. If a type of cultural religiosity surfaced in Dover to protect American civil space from the dangers of the Jonestown dead, it was a civil religion of exclusion. Obviously, the dead registered as dangerously defiling because they violated Dover's sense of civil and religious order. Mary Douglas has taught us to interrogate impurity as a violation of order; without order, no defilement. But the dialectic of purity and danger could certainly be reversed to suggest that without defilement, no order. As a symbolic order, American civil religion has been negotiated under the sign of *difference*. Not the tri-faith unity suggested by Herberg, nor the interreligious, interethnic, interracial, interclass Memorial Day unity imagined by Warner, nor even the shared national goals identified by Bellah have been adequate to account for the formation of civil religious worldviews in America. Civil worldviews have been constructed through discursive, practical, and institutional patterns of exclusion. At least since the 1950s, the dominant lines along which civil religious worldviews in America have been constructed have been geopolitical and racial conflict (Chidester, 1988c). This may not sound like a "genu-

³For a preliminary discussion of different constructions of civil religion, see Chidester (1988b: 81-109).

ine and universal apprehension of transcendent religious reality,” but it more accurately captures the way civil religion works on the ground, as it is “revealed through the experience of the American people.” Since worldviews negotiate *person* and *place* in a meaningful world, geopolitical and racial conflict have been the “genuine” interstices of worldview formation in recent American history. Significantly, the Peoples Temple was a self-proclaimed communist, black liberation movement that crossed both these lines. The Jonestown dead represented the remains of persons that had embraced highly charged geopolitical and racial defilements against which a dominant American civil symbolic order defined itself.

Second, civil religion may therefore not signify an arena of social cohesion, but an arena of social conflict. Conflict certainly arises from competing claims to privileged, exclusive ownership and use of civil religious symbols. Two Baptist ministers like Jerry Falwell and Jesse Jackson can make mutually exclusive, conflicting claims on American civil religion. But social conflict in American civil religion is also suggested by the fact that the American civil order was constructed and legitimated from the beginning by means of exclusion. Its original constitutional contract excluded those classified as lacking independent understanding and will—children, women, blacks, and the poor—from the civil right of enfranchisement, which excluded them from any guarantee of the protection of human rights, which excluded them from the very definition of a fully human person (Chidester, 1988b:64-5). In life, the Peoples Temple experienced itself as excluded from full participation as fully human persons in American civil space. America was not “God’s new Israel,” but it was “Pharaoh’s Egypt, Pharaoh’s Washington, Pharaoh’s America” (Chidester, 1988a:90). In death, that experience of “existential outsideness” was certified by the ritual exclusion of the Jonestown dead. If those rituals reflected anything about American civil religion, they signified that it is necessarily implicated in institutionalized practices of inclusion and exclusion that reveal more about conflicts in American society than they do about social cohesion.

Finally, the tale of two cities in the disposition of the Jonestown dead suggests that civil religion may not always function as a unified, national sacred charter, but may often appear in local or regional commitments to symbolic order. Influential studies of American symbolic life have concentrated on the microanalysis of local communities, whether “Middletown,” “Yankee City,” or the community that W. Lloyd Warner identified, with what must now appear as a retrospective irony in the context of the present discussion, “Jonesville.” Jonesville was

described as “a representative community in the United States” that could be analyzed to reveal “the larger design of American life.” The Jonesvilles of America, Warner claimed, “are essentially alike. Sometimes the road signs at their entrance spell out Atlanta, Springfield, or Walla Walla, but no matter what the signs say or how the alphabetical letters are arranged they still spell Jonesville” (1949:xiv). After our brief visits to Dover and San Francisco, I think we can say that this reduction of all American communities to Jonesville is palpably false. Dover and San Francisco clearly had different interests in the disposition of the Jonestown dead. Disposition was a bicoastal operation, but not an instance of national cooperation. Instead, competing interests in maintaining or restoring the symbolic order of a community were vested in very different local concerns. Although most Americans would probably have felt more at home in Dover than in San Francisco in this regard, the two cities enacted very different options in identifying local civil religious conditions for the inclusion or exclusion of the Jonestown dead. Neither city’s concerns, it should be noted, were fully realized: the dead were not fully excluded from American space, nor were they fully reincorporated in the healing of a restored community. Nevertheless, these local efforts to renegotiate a disrupted symbolic order suggest that one meaningful way to define a national civil religion would be as a generalized, loose constellation of regional interests. Those interests are constantly being negotiated and renegotiated through social practices of inclusion and exclusion.

In death’s wake, ritual practices of inclusion and exclusion renegotiate the possibility of a human community. Dover and San Francisco were on the frontlines of those negotiations in response to the death of 913 Americans at Jonestown, but the whole of America was implicated. Public awareness of the Jonestown event registered just below the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the assassination of John F. Kennedy (two other seriously disruptive events) in a poll conducted by George Gallop; 98 percent of Americans had heard of the incomprehensible deaths in Jonestown. Generally, Americans came to terms with the event by dismissing the people of Jonestown as not sane, not Christian, and not American, thereby reinforcing normative psychological, religious, and political boundaries around a legitimate human identity in America. These strategic denials were enacted in the ritual exclusion of the Jonestown dead. The disposition of the Jonestown dead revealed more, therefore, than the ritual reconstruction of two American communities disrupted by death; it exposed important tensions in the more general,

ongoing attempts to construct something that might count as a fully human identity in American society.

REFERENCES

- Bellah, Robert
1970 *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Binford, L.R.
1971 "Mortuary Practices: Their Study and Their Potential." In *Memoirs of the Society for American Archaeology*. Ed. by J. A. Brown. 25:6-29.
- Chidester, David
1988a *Salvation and Suicide: An Interpretation of Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
1988b *Patterns of Power: Religion and Politics in American Culture*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
1988c "Stealing the Sacred Symbols: Biblical Interpretation in the Peoples Temple and the Unification Church." *Religion* 18:137-62.
- Douglas, Mary
1967 *Purity and Danger*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Feinsod, Ethan
1981 *Awake in a Nightmare: Jonestown, the Only Eyewitness Account*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Herberg, Will
1955 *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*. New York: Doubleday.
- Hertz, Robert
1960 *Death and the Right Hand*. Trans. by Rodney Needham and Claudia Needham. London: Cohen and West.
- Lane, Mark
1980 *The Strongest Poison*. New York: Hawthorn.
- Moore, Rebecca
(ed.)
n.d. *Peoples Temple in Jonestown, Guyana*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. State Department Files on Jonestown.

- Redfield, Robert *The Papers of Robert Redfield. Vol. 1: Human Nature and the Study of Society; Vol. 2: The Social Uses of Social Science.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
1963
- Schärer, Hans *Ngaju Religion: The Conception of God among a South Borneo People.* Trans. by Rodney Needham. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
1963
- Smith, Jonathan Z. *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
1982
- Tainter, J.A. "Social Inference and Mortuary Practices: An Experiment in Numerical Classification," *World Archaeology* 7:1-15.
1975
- 1978 "Mortuary Practices and the Study of Prehistoric Social Systems." In *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory*. Ed. by M. Schiffer. New York: Academic Press.
- Toqueville, Alexis de *Democracy in America.* 2 vols. Ed. by Phillips Bradley. New York: Random House.
1967
- Warner, W. Lloyd *Democracy in Jonesville: A Study of Quality and Inequality.* New York: Harper and Brothers.
1949
- 1959 *The Living and the Dead: A Study of the Symbolic Life of Americans.* New Haven: Yale University Press.