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## 5

### Three Groups in One

Since Ernst Troeltsch's groundbreaking work (1931) on the relationship between church and society in which he defined *church* and *sect* as two different kinds of religious bodies that have a number of theological and demographic traits, sociologists of religion have felt obliged to define their use of these terms before applying them to specific religious groups. Some have defined them on the basis of theological views or the dynamics of the group's sociohistorical origins, others on the basis of demographics, yet others by the classic Troeltschian typology.<sup>1</sup> To add to the confusion around these categories, which have even less uniformity of application than of definition, a "new" kind of religious group appeared on the American social landscape in the 1960s, which has been variously described as "new religious movements," "innovative religions," "marginal religions," or more commonly, "cults." The difficulty with using this latter term is that it has been used pejoratively by the anticult movement and sensationally by the media so that it is no longer clear that it can be used as a neutral descriptive term in social scientific inquiry. For this reason I use *new religious movement* to refer to this latter category.

One of the weaknesses of the analyses of the Jonestown suicides to date has been the tendency to explore only Jim Jones's motive, then treat the group as a uniform mass as in "mass suicide." By looking at the three groups that existed side by side within Peoples Temple and exploring the motives for each one gains an insight into the complex

1. Thomas O'Dea 1966 is the most thorough exploration of the Troeltschian model.

nature of the decision to commit suicide on 18 November 1978.<sup>2</sup> I argue that a membership shift occurred when Peoples Temple relocated to California, which caused Peoples Temple to become first two, then later three, groups within a single movement. The Indiana Peoples Temple was essentially a sect, which was joined by new religious movement members in California, which then recruited black church members as it focused its ministry on the residents of urban California. Each group had its own organizational role in Peoples Temple—with the California new religious movement members holding the most institutional power—and its own understanding of the purpose and meaning of Jonestown.

Stark and Bainbridge (1985, chap. 2) stress the issue of the socio-historical origins of a religious group when distinguishing among churches, sects, and cults. To Stark and Bainbridge a sect is a religious organization that has broken away from another religious group over issues of belief or leadership, whereas a cult is a group that arises out of the general social environment because of a religious or spiritual innovation that is attractive to a number of people. In addition they stress the importance of the relationship between the religious movement being studied (whether church, sect, or cult) and the surrounding sociocultural environment. Their theory, building on that of Benton Johnson (1963), is that a church is in relatively low tension with its host society, whereas both sects and cults are in high tension. The difference between sects and cults is based on the origination factor: sects split off of already existing groups, whereas cults are born of an innovator in belief or practice or both that captures the imagination of some people.

### The Indiana Sect

The Indiana-based Peoples Temple Full Gospel Church was a sect both in terms of its origins and its own self-concept. Jim Jones was not claiming to have created something new with Peoples Temple. Rather,

2. By examining the specific historical and sociological details of Jonestown it is more difficult to apply the “lesson of Jonestown,” which generally boils down to “all cults are bad,” to the great variety of new religions. One of my intentions in this discourse is to make it more difficult for those who want to destroy new religions on ideological or theological grounds to do so by recourse to the “this group is a Jonestown waiting to happen” argument.

he was calling his followers back to the “authentic” Christianity reflected in the ministry of Jesus Christ to the outcasts of society. As Stark and Bainbridge point out, “Sects claim to be the authentic, purged, refurbished version of the faith from which they split” (1979, 125). After several years of attempting to integrate racially the Methodist Church in Indianapolis as a student pastor, Jim Jones gave up on mainstream institutional Protestantism and decided to initiate a church that was “truer” to the Gospel message of love and inclusiveness. In 1954 Jones rented a building in a racially mixed area of Indianapolis, which he named Community Unity. The success of that ministry, which focused on Pentecostal-style healing services, free meals for the poor and homeless, and nursing home facilities for the elderly, was followed by a move to a bigger church in another racially mixed inner-city neighborhood where Wings of Deliverance metamorphosed into Peoples Temple. By 1960 twenty-eight hundred meals per month were being served by Peoples Temple under the direction of Reverend Archie Ijames, the first black man to be in leadership in the sect (Reiterman 1982, 55).<sup>3</sup> In Indiana, Jones initiated a leadership structure that involved a team of ministers, including Russell Winberg and Jack Beam from the Laurel Street Tabernacle and Archie Ijames.

“Divine” healings, clairvoyance, and other demonstrations of special spiritual gifts were Jim Jones’s drawing card during the late 1950s in Indiana. He attracted several families from the Laurel Street Tabernacle—the Cordell family was among these early Pentecostal recruits—and nearly twenty people from a spiritualist state convention at which he demonstrated his psychic gifts (Reiterman 1982, 50). Edith Parks began attending Peoples Temple because of her positive impression of Jones from that convention, and she eventually brought into the Temple her son, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren. The Cordells and Parks relocated with Peoples Temple twice, once to California and then to Guyana. The Parks family were important core members of the Indiana sect with skills and dedication to offer the growing religious movement. Dale Parks, one of Edith’s grandchildren, was an inhalation therapist whose medical training was especially important for the health care of the large population of elderly who moved with Peoples Temple to Jonestown. Tim Reiterman notes that it was

3. According to CHS, BB-18-z-78, the restaurant on N. Delaware Street in Indianapolis first opened its doors on 24 February 1960 and fed eighteen people; the second day it fed one hundred until it leveled off at twenty-eight hundred per month.

Marceline Jones who convinced Dale Parks to relocate to Guyana: "Dale had become disenchanted with Jones in California; however, Marceline Jones pleaded with him to give Jonestown a chance" (393).

Marceline Jones was an important leader within the Indiana sect and one of the reasons for its success. The nursing homes that Peoples Temple established were a particular interest of Marceline Jones, who was trained as a nurse and had a fondness for working with older people. Reiterman writes of her commitment to this ministry during the Indiana years. "When [the Joneses] found one of the Temple members unhappy and covered with bedsores in a nursing home, they brought the woman to their large white duplex. . . . Marceline converted her own house into a nursing home, with help from Jim, and, while working an outside nursing job, brought the home up to state standards" (Reiterman 1982, 56). The two nursing homes that Marceline Jones ran in Indianapolis were known for their high standards of care. The ratio of aides to residents was high, and there was a commitment to no differentiation between the paying and nonpaying patients.<sup>4</sup>

Marceline Jones's importance as a Christian role model extended beyond her nursing care for the elderly to the matriarch of a "rainbow family." The Joneses referred to themselves in this way as they self-consciously attempted to model a racially integrated society within their own family (Hall 1987, 47–48). Starting in the late 1950s, she and Jim adopted two orphans from Korea, she gave birth to their only natural son, Stephan Gandhi Jones, and they adopted a black child, whom they named after his adoptive father. They were the first white couple in Indianapolis to adopt a black child (47–48). The Indiana sect that the Joneses founded was very much a family affair. When *Wings of Deliverance* was incorporated in April 1955, Jim, Marceline, and Jim's mother, Lynetta Jones, were the trustees (43). Marceline Jones was as committed to its social justice ministry as was Jim. When Jones began preaching about feeding the hungry and taking care of the sick, the numbers in attendance at services began to fall off. But Marceline Jones was undaunted: "People that did stay were people that wanted to go on to perfection. . . . And so where numbers were sacrificed, quality was gained" (45).

Jones encouraged members of Peoples Temple to refer to himself as "father" and to Marceline as "Mother Jones." This reflected, in

4. CHS, BB-18-z-114.

part, the influence that Father Divine's Philadelphia-based interracial religious movement had on Jones. The Joneses had visited Father and Mother Divine in the 1950s and had been impressed with their social justice ministry and the organization of the movement. As C. Eric Lincoln has pointed out, referring to Marceline as "Mother" reflected the importance of her role in Peoples Temple: "Like Father Divine, Jones urged his parishioners in Indianapolis to call him 'Father' or 'Dad.' . . . In the black religious tradition counterpart terminology may also be applied to the wife of the leader—especially if he himself is highly venerated and if she is considered properly complementary" (Lincoln and Mamiya 1980, 17).

### **The California New Religious Movement**

Marceline Jones's influence and authority began to diminish once the sect moved to California and began to attract new religious movement members. By virtue of its migration from America's Midwest to California, Peoples Temple metamorphosed from a sect into a cult in Stark and Bainbridge's schema. In California its blend of Pentecostal revivalism, divine healings, charismatic leadership, and an interracial social gospel ministry indeed represented something "new vis-à-vis the other religious bodies of the society in question," which was experienced by the new converts as something "different, new, more advanced" (Stark and Bainbridge 1979, 125). The individuals who joined Peoples Temple during the late 1960s and early 1970s saw Jim Jones—not Jim and Marceline Jones—as the leader of the religious movement they were joining. Particularly after Carolyn Layton became the visible partner of Jim Jones from 1969 onward, the authority of Marceline Jones began to fade.

Grace Stoen indicated that Marceline Jones spent most of her time with the "peripheral" members of the Temple. These so-called peripheral members were primarily the Indiana sect members and many of the urban black church members who joined in the mid-1970s and grew to respect and love her as the gentle "mother" of their church. Within the leadership, comprising almost exclusively educated, white women from the new religious movement group, she was often "put down" in her absence, according to Stoen. Further, Marceline Jones was aware of her marginal status within the inner circle and avoided meetings of the leadership unless her presence was

absolutely necessary. Marceline was a “nonentity” in Stoen’s words (G. S. Jones interview, 3 Dec. 1992).

Kenneth Wooden’s book on Jonestown (1981) is an exemplar of anticult movement ideology. One sign of its dependence on ideology over data is that it has no notes. No references are needed because the reader will provide the “ideological connectives” as proof to support Wooden’s argument. He portrays Jim Jones as a sex maniac who uses both women and men to gratify his own lust for power and sex. It includes a detailed explication of how brainwashing was practiced in Peoples Temple. His primary source of information are the atrocity stories of Peoples Temple apostate Jeannie Mills who, along with her husband, founded the Human Freedom Center, an anticult deprogramming center. Because Wooden has sympathy for Marceline Jones, he quotes from Mills a speech of Marceline’s that gives some insight into the shift in influence that she had experienced once the inner circle began forming around her husband.

It’s true that I have had to share my husband in the past, for the Cause. It was always painful for me because I love him very much, and just like everyone else, it’s painful for me to see the person I love with someone else. Several years ago, Jim asked me for a divorce because I just couldn’t make the adjustment to being married to a man who was also married to a Cause. At that time I had to do some serious introspection and decide on my priorities. I knew I didn’t want to lose Jim, so I agreed that I would share him with people who needed to relate to the Cause on a more personal level. This has been a very difficult thing for me to live with, and it’s caused me a lot of heartache. However, tonight, as I heard him pour out his heart to you, explaining the suffering he goes through when he has to use his body to serve the Cause, I realized that I have been very selfish. I want to make a public statement tonight that I am willing to share my husband for the Cause, and that I won’t resent it any longer. (Wooden 1981, 43–44).

Carolyn Layton and Jim Jones began their affair in early 1969. The numbers of people involved in the Peoples Temple ministry rose markedly in the early 1970s, and the sense of the importance and scale of the ministry that Marceline and Jim Jones had created in Indiana some twenty years earlier grew with it. One could easily read the above, substituting *Carolyn* for *cause* in most instances. It suggests that

not only did “Jim equal Peoples Temple” for many of the women in leadership but for Jim (and Marceline) *Carolyn* may have represented the *Cause*! Thus, “I just couldn’t make the adjustment to being married to a man who was also married to a Cause/Carolyn” and “I want to make a public statement tonight that I am willing to share my husband for the Cause/with Carolyn, and that I won’t resent it any longer.” This last statement was a public armistice between Marceline Jones and Carolyn Layton. Stephan Jones indicated that there was a great deal of “resentment and dislike” of Layton among those people who respected and loved his mother because Layton often “behaved as a wife” to Jim Jones (S. G. Jones interview, 7 Dec. 1992). By calling a truce Marceline Jones cleared the way for Layton to practice more public authority in the Temple, gave the Indiana members permission to be loyal to what Peoples Temple had become, and took the moral and sacrificial high ground. It was Marceline Jones who demonstrated in her speech that night that loyalty to the Peoples Temple *cause* could cost a person her marriage, her pride, her rightful place in her own religious movement, and foreshadowed still greater sacrifices to come.

The inner circle only became an entity after both the numbers and the complexity of the ministries increased with the move to California. In 1966, the year after the move from Indiana, Peoples Temple had only 86 adult members. By 1968 the numbers had increased only to 136 although significantly this increase represented the addition of the young intellectual elite such as Timothy Oliver Stoen and Carolyn Moore Layton (Hall 1987, 65). As Hall points out, this was a significant turning point for the one-time Indiana sect: “The influx of a core of White, middle-class California college graduates and professionals like Stoen, social worker Linda Amos, the Mertles, and high school teacher Carolyn Moore Layton attracted others from relatively affluent sectors of society” (67).

The most important effect of the addition of the new religious movement members was that their organizational and bureaucratic talent catapulted the Peoples Temple ministry onto a totally different scale of operation. By the time the movement relocated to Guyana in 1977 Peoples Temple was able to boast an active membership of three thousand (Hall 1987, 69). The inner circle developed as a result of the need to coordinate the ministry activities of the Temple and also to protect and control that most precious of limited resources within Peoples Temple—Jim Jones.

As Weightman notes, beginning at this time, “such limited power



and confidence as he chose to share was invested in a largely unofficial elite consisting primarily of women" (Weightman 1983, 135). Perhaps it was easier for Jones to focus his attention on the new religious movement members rather than on the Indiana sect members in part because their loyalty to him was not shared with Marceline. For the Indiana sect there was a loyalty to both Jim and Marceline Jones and to what their family represented. They had watched the rainbow family come into being and had been part of building the social justice and humanitarian care ministry from the ground up. To the new religious movement members the ministry of Peoples Temple and the leadership of Jim Jones was already in place—albeit on a small scale—which led to a tendency to “deify” Jones for what he articulated and symbolized.

### **The Urban Black Church**

Most of the three thousand and the majority of those who moved with Peoples Temple to Jonestown, Guyana, were yet a third type of Peoples Temple member. They were primarily black and lived in urban California, particularly San Francisco and Los Angeles. The attraction of Peoples Temple for these former and current church members was the ability to bridge the gap between the other-worldly preaching of many black spiritualist church traditions and the concrete political activism of the black power political movements. These were people whose faith in the healing power of God and the church had been shaken, but not destroyed, by the deaths of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and the relentless pressures of urban life. For these members the healing the Temple could provide was an important attraction. But, as Weightman has rightly indicated, this was not a recapitulation of the divine healings of Jones's Indiana days, rather the healings were more general than those had been. “There were other, additional kinds of appeal, but all of them cluster around the concept of healing—the healing of individual personal ills, whether they be physical, spiritual, or emotional; the healing of small groups, most importantly, families; and the healing of society through eradication of racial injustice and economic inequality” (Weightman 1983, 76).

One of the theoretical assumptions within the field of new religious movements that has negatively impacted the understanding of Peoples Temple has been the reliance on deprivation theory and social psychological interpretations of why people joined the movement. Deprivation theory has tended to focus on the socioeconomic needs

of the urban blacks who joined Peoples Temple, whereas the social psychological schema has focused on the unmet emotional needs of the white elite from Indiana and California. In terms of the social psychological schema even the more educationally elite members were assumed to have some kind of problem that drove them to affiliate with a movement like Peoples Temple.

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. (Johnson 1979, 15)

The underlying assumption of either analysis is that nobody “normal,” either economically comfortable or psychologically well-adjusted, would ever choose to become a member of a new religious movement. Even Steve Rose, a relatively sophisticated interpreter of Jonestown, refers to the majority of Peoples Temple members as “America’s dispossessed underclass” (Rose 1979, 44) and “the largely helpless contingent of elderly blacks” (45), thus affirming their deprived status.

Weightman struggles against the deprivation theory schema by using exchange theorists James Downton and Rosabeth Moss Kanter to suggest that the urban black members of Peoples Temple did not have to be maladjusted to commit their lives to Peoples Temple nor to move to Jonestown, Guyana. Rather, their decision was the result of weighing the potential rewards and penalties of each action, which committed them more deeply to the group (Weightman 1983, chap. 2). Her more sophisticated application of deprivation theory suggests that there were fewer “penalties” in family and community disapproval for the socioeconomically disadvantaged who were attracted to Peoples Temple during its urban California membership drive and, potentially, much greater rewards in security and community. There was nothing “crazy” about those choices. On the contrary, given the social and economic conditions in which many urban blacks found themselves in San Francisco and Los Angeles during the 1970s, joining the Peoples Temple was a decidedly sane and rational decision.

Black scholars and pastors have tried to make sense of the at-

traction of Peoples Temple to Black Church members. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya (1980) argue that Jones was able to see the unmet needs in the lives of urban blacks and offered an attractive religious alternative for those “individuals whose despair of relief has become increasingly pronounced and whose search for deliverance has turned from “rational” or conventional resources (which have been unavailing) to the challenge of possibilities which lie outside the normal pattern of social or ideological experience” (15).

They conclude that “it can be said of the Blacks who followed Jones . . . their common conviction is that they have finally found a way where there was no way” (Lincoln and Mamiya 1980, 16). This choice by individual Black Church members to become a follower of Jones actually led to a complete loss of self, according to Lincoln and Mamiya, as “the old unappreciated self is abandoned and the image of the believer is merged into the image of the cult” (16). The Black Church was severely shaken by the events at Jonestown. In the wake of the tragedy the question was posed: “Why, in this era of black consciousness and black liberation (in which the Black Church figures so prominently), so many black people did in fact give their allegiance, their money, and finally their lives to Jim Jones, a white, self-proclaimed apostle to America’s disinherited” (8–9).

Lincoln and Mamiya find no satisfactory answer to this question but note that it is an area of inquiry that should interest and concern the Black Church.

Archie Smith, Jr., devoted the final chapter of his book on ethics and therapy from a Black Church perspective (1982) to a consideration of the “implications for the Black Church” of Peoples Temple and Jonestown. He points out that “a cross section of the black community was present at Jonestown—although the majority were from low-income neighborhoods, and many were welfare dependents” (A. Smith 1982, 196). He notes that some of the members of Peoples Temple were also members in good standing of their local Black Churches. Membership in Peoples Temple was not, according to Smith, necessarily a critique of the Black Church. He quotes one woman who was a member of both as saying that she joined Peoples Temple because “they did things together, ate and took trips together” (196). Like Lincoln, he sees the motivation for membership as having been a desire to escape “a general sense of despair that affects many in our society,” specifically “loneliness, depression, exploitation, racism, alienation, sexism” (197). He commends the members of Peoples

Temple for not seeking refuge “in a privatized faith, but in a renewed and transformed social order” (179).

In the end Smith concludes that Jonestown was a “product of a culture which tends to repress and trivialize the essentially religious impulse” (A. Smith 1982, 207). Secularization is particularly problematic for black people because the connection between culture and religion has deep historic roots in the African experience. The community that Peoples Temple provided mirrored this connection and was, therefore, attractive to urban blacks for whom the three “key institutions” of black American survival—family, church, and religion—had ceased to provide a cohesive social environment (214).

Black people's involvement in the Peoples' Temple Movement can be seen as an attempt to make black religion relevant to their social, political, and economic condition. By breaking with the insularity and seemingly irrelevant style of some recent black church worship, many thought they had found in the Peoples' Temple a form of church involvement that spoke more directly to the issues of spiritual uplift, justice, social empowerment, and change. (216).

Smith warns that there will be a temptation on the part of Black Church leaders to denounce Jones as a madman and his followers as victims without looking carefully at the implicit critique a predominantly black religious movement with an almost exclusively white leadership offers black mainstream religious organizations. Sadly, it seems that Smith was prophetic in predicting this response. At the fourteenth anniversary memorial service held at Evergreen Cemetery in Oakland, where the majority of the unclaimed Jonestown dead are buried, Evangelist Jynona Norwood described the two kinds of people who were attracted to Peoples Temple as “foolish or victims of circumstance.”<sup>5</sup>

Unlike most scholars who have written about Peoples Temple, Archie Smith has focused on the demographic particularities of the people who were members. He includes at the end of his discussion two diagrams that detail the membership by gender, race, and age (A. Smith 1982, 229–31). He uses these demographics to make more

5. Jynona Norwood made these comments during the fourteenth anniversary memorial service, 18 November 1992, Evergreen Cemetery, Oakland, in which she demonized Jim Jones and portrayed the urban blacks within the Peoples Temple movement as victims of a madman.

explicit the point made by nearly every scholar who has studied Jonestown, namely, that Peoples Temple claimed to be reversing the racist social order but, in fact, perpetuated it within its own organization. The detail that he adds to this portrait, a portrait normally devoid of gender analysis, is that the 70 percent black membership was mostly women, many of whom were elderly (197).

One of the reasons why the membership numbers grew so rapidly during the mid-1970s was that Peoples Temple recruited entire family units and encouraged individual members to bring their families into the group (Weightman 1983, 86). Fifty women who were raising either one or two children without the support of a man were resident at Jonestown as were eighteen women with three or more children (see app. A, table 3). A great number of single individuals were there as well, but not the young, disaffected white people who are normally portrayed by the anticult movement as being attracted to new religions. Half of the three hundred single individuals at Jonestown were over the age of fifty, and nearly all of them were women (see app. A, table 4). The charge that new religious movements break up families has long been a foundational accusation of the anticult movement.<sup>6</sup>

Although Peoples Temple as a whole was more radical and, therefore, in higher tension with the surrounding culture than was a typical church, the Temple, nonetheless, behaved like a traditional mainstream religious organization in its recruitment strategies. Its most effective avenue for gaining new members was through the affective bonds of family and friends. This was true in its sect, new religious movement, and church phases. Individuals would be attracted to the Pentecostal-style healing services (this was especially the case in Indiana during the 1950s and 1960s), or interracial congregation and social activism (California during the late 1960s and early 1970s), or social services and supportive community (urban California during the mid-1970s). Individuals would then invite family members and close friends to participate in this wonderful church they had found. Even the most negative accounts of Peoples Temple generally start with an account of the excitement at having discovered such a lively, com-

6. This charge is probably used because much of the anticult movement's ideology and theory grew out of the battle that began in the 1970s between parents and their young adult children who had joined Unification Church, a new religious movement that included embracing Sun Myung Moon and his wife as "new parents" as a central part of its theology and social organization.

mitted, and caring congregation (Feinsod 1981, 89; Mills 1979, 117, 128–29).

The ministry in which the Peoples Temple new religious movement members were the most skilled was navigating the social welfare system in which many of its urban members found themselves entangled. This was especially appealing to those elderly members and single women with children who were dependent upon the government for financial assistance, housing, and health care. There are hundreds of files in the Peoples Temple Archives about social welfare or legal issues that Peoples Temple “counselors” helped members to negotiate. The goal of the mostly white and educated counselors was to protect their members from the dehumanization that poor, elderly, and black people often experience when dealing with government agencies. One of the shifts in ministry that occurred when Peoples Temple relocated to Jonestown was that instead of advocating on behalf of people against an existing bureaucratic system, the leadership found itself in a position of designing and administrating a bureaucratic system of their own, thus fulfilling Weber’s prediction about the “routinization of charisma.”

Throughout the history of Peoples Temple, no one was ever turned away no matter how great their problems. As a result, those in leadership were often overwhelmed with the economic, health, and emotional needs of members. Peoples Temple was proud of the number of criminals and drug addicts who were reformed through membership. Because Peoples Temple was committed religiously and politically to caring for anyone who came to them, there was an increased need to “control” those who did stay. In Jonestown this led to draconian measures. It also meant that the formula had been set that eventually led to attempting to meet unlimited needs with limited resources. This dilemma would be crucial in setting the stage for the psychic and social stress that led to the decision to commit suicide.