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RELIGIOUS MASS SUICIDE BEFORE JONESTOWN: THE RUSSIAN OLD BELIEVERS

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Over a period of several decades in late seventeenth and early eighteenth century Russia, tens of thousands of "Old Believers" committed suicide, generally by self-immolation. Most of the suicides were not individual acts but transpired in the context of catastrophic collective events at hermitages or monasteries. In several instances the number of persons who perished at a burned-out settlement far exceeded the number of deaths at Jonestown. Convergences with the People's Temple holocaust include: a general climate of apocalyptic excitation; a sectarian manichean outlook which perceived absolute evil triumphant in the world, and in which "political" themes became more prominent over time; and a conviction of imminent armed assault by hostile forces. Both the Old Believers and the People's Temple experienced difficulties in resolving the tension between the impulse to violently confront a demonic state and the desire to develop a communal refuge where they could live according to their faith. Marked divergences include the degree of actual persecution, and the post-holocaust survival and growth of the Old Believers.

Although much has been written about the mass suicide of members of the People's Temple community at Jonestown in Guyana in November, 1978; very little of the literature has entailed a comparative analysis focusing on other incidents involving collective suicide events resembling the tragic events at Jonestown.¹ Contemporary American "cults" have been the primary referent for comparisons and prophetic extrapolations of the "lessons of Jonestown" (e.g., Seigelman and Conway, 1979; Yanoff, 1984). The diversity of the groups which have been subsumed under the "cult" label may vitiate the heuristic value of these warnings, even when a subcategory of "destructive cults" is specified. Numerous authoritarian, communal and "totalistic" spiritual movements have not become involved in spectacular large-scale violence. The deviant and authoritarian practices related to life in Jonestown

1. During the preparation of this paper the author was not aware of any other scholarly work which ventured a comparison between the Jonestown tragedy and mass suicides among the "Old Believers" in the late seventeenth century Russia. While this article was in press, the author was sent an insightful conference paper, "Religious Suicide: Death and Classification at Jonestown" (Chidester, 1983). Chidester's description of the events leading up to the Russian suicides is less extensive than the present account, and his theoretical framework, though quite incisive, is very different from the present writer's exploratory focus.

prior to the final holocaust are common to numerous world-rejecting sects (Hall, 1981) such that the characteristic features of these movements cannot be viewed as predictive of mass suicide, although they may perhaps be necessary conditions. On the other hand, an exclusive focus on contemporary American phenomena holds constant some of the contextual factors which a cross-cultural or historical inquiry might explore.

It is noteworthy that there are certain historical episodes which bear some similarity to the events at Jonestown. The present exploratory paper hardly represents an exhaustive analysis of either the Jonestown tragedy or any other historical episode, nor is any decisive predictive formula attempted. It is hoped that this paper will serve as a stimulant to subsequent investigations of historical episodes of collective self-extinction which will have an explicit or implicit comparative focus. This paper will examine one such episode and draw some suggestive parallels with the Jonestown tragedy.

THE OLD BELIEVER SUICIDES

During the final decades of the seventeenth century in Russia at least twenty thousand men and women burned themselves to death. On a smaller scale this practice continued until the mid-nineteenth century. Most of the suicides were not individual actions but rather were part of collective events transpiring at a monastery or peasant community linked to the schismatic "Old Believer" movement. One of the earlier instances in 1679 involved an expedition of soldiers sent to destroy a hermitage by the Berezorka river where Old Believers were said to have gathered and gone into a state of religious ecstasy. Troops were sent to take the leaders into custody, but the sectarians were warned of the approaching soldiers. "When the soldiers arrived," writes historian George Vernadsky, "they found only smouldering ruins; the Old Believers had burned the buildings and themselves. Seventeen hundred men and women perished in the holocaust" (Vernadsky, 1969:710).

In the following sections we will give a short review of the Great Schism in the Russian Orthodox Church and the facts leading up to the wave of mass suicide events in the late 17th century. We will then summarize Cherniavsky's (1970) discussion of the evolving "political theology" of the Old Believers and its relationship to their descent into apocalyptic despair. We will then develop tentative parallels with the Jonestown episode as analyzed by Naipaul (1980) and Hall (1981).

The Great Schism

The Great Dissent or *Raskol* began in the reign of Tsar Alexis, who appointed Nikon orthodox Patriarch of Moscow. During 1652-54 Nikon decreed changes in ritual and liturgy involving the sign of the cross (to be made with 3 fingers instead of the traditional 2) the number and manner of prostrations, the Hallelujah glorification, and texts for services. Nikon's reforms represented "resolute measures to make Russian practice conform with the usages of the Greek and Ukrainian churches of his

day" (Crummey, 1970:4).² Supported by the Tsar, Nikon forced through his reforms in a series of church councils during 1654-56 at which persisting clerical opponents of his measures were condemned. In 1656, a handful of priests led by archpriest Avvakum were disciplined and exiled. These "Old Believers" affirmed that "The Muskovite Church was right and could never sin in word, customs or writings, for the Church was sacred and nothing in its practice or doctrine could be suppressed or altered . . . They regarded any modification of the church service as a sin which obstructed the way to salvation" (Zenkovsky, 1957a:42).

Who were the dissenters? Murvar (1975) notes that the *Raskolniki*, "directly originated from the monastic institutions of the official state church. Organized monasticism in its totality violently opposed the changes planned by Nikon and by the tsars. The chief organizers and propagandists of resistance and the subsequent emergent sects were respectable leaders of the monks, including the abbots of famous monasteries. They were convinced that they were defending the only true traditionalistic Orthodox values and were willing to fight to martyrdom" (Murvar, 1975:290). The monks welcomed the opportunity to liberate themselves from the Orthodox hierarchy (which basically accepted the Nikonian reforms) and to exercise innovative personal charisma.

As it grew the *Raskol* attracted large numbers of peasants, for whom religious restorationism arguably became a symbolic expression of popular antipathy to the consolidation of serfdom and the bureaucratic centralization of the tsarist state. The Nikonian revisions of tradition also had an intrinsic significance for illiterate peasants for whom "ritual gesture and doctrine were inseparable" such that arbitrary liturgical changes "might well seem to subvert the Orthodox faith itself" (Crummey, 1970:9).

The Kapitons. The recruitment of common folk to the *Raskol* was enhanced by the fact that, "in the middle decades of the seventeenth century, the cultural atmosphere of Russia was charged with tension born of apocalyptic expectations" (Crummey, 1970:7). This apocalyptic milieu will be discussed later and compared with the American milieu of 1970s and 80s. For now it must be noted that the apocalyptic mood in Russia found expression in a sect led by the ascetic hermit, Kapiton, which affirmed that, "the end of the world was at hand and that Antichrist already ruled the world" (Crummey, 1970:7). Kapiton urged his followers to prepare for the end through prayer, fasting, and other ascetic practices. However, some Kapitonists felt that this was not sufficient, "they longed to follow the example of the saints of the early church and suffer martyrdom for their faith . . . Small groups of the sect's members quenched their thirst for martyrdom by burning themselves to death in 1665 and 1666 in scattered locations of northern Russia" (Crummey, 1970:45). Suicidal Kapitons referred to their immolative apotheosis as "purification by fire" (Vernadsky, 1969:698). Subsequent Old Believer self-immolations were on a far larger scale but they may have been influenced by the earlier *Kapitonovshchina*.

2. Ultimately, Nikon's revisionism may have reflected the transformation of the expanding Tsarist state from "a purely Great Russian state" to an "All-Russian Empire" (Zenkovsky, 1957a:42).

Old Believer Ups and Downs. A key feature of the history of the Old Believer movement prior to the largest wave of suicides in the late 1680s and early 1690s was a series of events whereby at certain points political conditions appeared favorable for a restoration of the old practices to the Orthodox church; yet, each time defeat and repression was somehow extricated from the jaws of victory which had seemed to be gaping. Continually tantalized and then frustrated, the Old Believers became increasingly volatile and apocalyptic.

Patriarch Nikon, an ecclesiastical supremicist, fell out with the Tsar and the boyars and, after 1658, ceased to exercise his patriarchal functions. Irritated by Nikon's interference in state affairs, some of the boyars began to patronize the Old Believers. The exiled Avvakum returned to Moscow and was received by Tsar Alexis. But Avvakum also tended to emphasize the importance of having the state guided by religious authorities, and the boyars, "came to believe that Avvakum, given the chance, would be even more unmanageable, and more dangerous to the interests of the state as they understood them, than Nikon" (Vernadsky, 1969:594). Avvakum was arrested and re-exiled in 1664. A council of Bishops in 1666-67 formally deposed Nikon but also sanctioned the Nikonian reforms and anathematized the dissidents.

In 1669 three noble women who had joined the Old Believers were imprisoned and starved and other leading adherents were executed. At this time government troops had been besieging the Solovokii Monastery, an Old Believer stronghold, for several years. In 1657 the monks had refused to use reformed service texts sent by the patriarch. In 1666, the opposition of the militant monks "flared into open revolt" and they declared that they were willing to suffer rather than cross themselves with 3 fingers, which evoked "the seal of Antichrist" (Crummey, 1970:18-19). The government intervened in 1667 and the siege of the monastery lasted 8 years, during which the resisters became increasingly radicalized. They were reported to be welcoming fleeing survivors of the failed revolt of Stepan Razin. In 1673 they formally resolved not to pray for the Tsar. "Gradually the political elements in the revolt achieved increasing prominence until, in the last stages, it became a hopeless protest against the legitimacy and effective power of the Russian government" (Crummey, 1970:21). After the fall of the Monastery in 1676 the soldiers "slaughtered all but fourteen of the approximately two hundred defenders and put the cloister to the sack" (Crummey, 1970:20). But the monks who escaped became militant leaders and missionaries.

A few days after the fall of the monastery Tsar Alexis died. He was succeeded by his sickly son Feodor, whose government exiled Matveev, a "westernizing" statesman and opponent of the Old Believers. "For a moment, the Old Believers had hopes that the wheel of history was turning and that the government would take a more conciliatory attitude toward them. These hopes did not materialize" (Vernadsky, 1969:709). Tsar Feodor, whose tutor had been an anti-Old Believer polemicist, kept up the pressure.

"Desperation spread among the adherents of the true faith. They felt that the kingdom of Antichrist was about to come. The trends developing among the Old Believers worried even Avvakum" (Vernadsky, 1969:709). It was in this context that the mass suicide event, which we have previously described, took place at the

Berezorka river hermitage where soldiers discovered smouldering ruins and 1700 corpses (Vernadsky, 1969:710). But worse was yet to come!

The Revolt of the Streltsy. Avvakum urged his colleagues to pray for Tsar Feodor and hoped that the Tsar might be persuaded to return to the old ways. However, another leader, Abbot Dosifei, determined to resort to force. He planned a demonstration among some sympathetic streltsy (Moscow garrison troops) and “consulted Avvakum about his plan.” The latter approved. “ ‘Act for the love of God, but move with prudence’ ” (Vernadsky, 1969:710-711). There was an abortive Moscow conspiracy in January 1681, after which “It was decided to strengthen the punitive measures against the Old Believers” (Vernadsky, 1969:711). Avvakum and three colleagues were burned at the stake on April 4, 1682.

But meanwhile Feodor had died in February, 1682. The succession was disputed between two half-brothers: Sixteen-year-old Ivan, who was sickly and retarded, and robust, ten year old Peter. Their elder sister Sophia exploited discontent among the streltsy, who stormed the palace, slaughtered Matveev (who had been returned to power by the supporters of Peter) and other notables, and installed Sophia as regent. Prince Khovansky, who appeared sympathetic to the Old Believers, was appointed commander of the streltsy.

The streltsy now presented a “petition” which initially pleaded for tolerance for the old practices, but, “the plea for toleration quickly turned into a demand for religious restoration” (Cherniavsky, 1970:157). Sophia was forced to sponsor a public debate on the Nikonian reforms, at which, “the Old Believer’s chief spokesman, Nikita ‘pustosviat’ (‘the bigot’) treated the patriarch and Sophia herself with contemptuous disrespect and made abundantly clear that his party would be content with nothing else than a complete return to the pre-Nikonian ritual” (Crummey, 1970:22). Sophia perceived that implicit in this position was stigmatization of her father, Tsar Alexis, and her brother, Tsar Feodor, as heretics. She angrily expressed herself to this effect and stormed out of the meeting. Not long afterwards some loyalist streltsy arrested “the bigot,” who was beheaded for lese majesty. Subsequently, Sophia mobilized a detachment of gentry cavalry, which overpowered Prince Khovansky’s streltsy guard and executed Khovansky and others.

The events of the strelsky revolt set the stage for intensified persecution and alienation. The crisis of 1682 “showed that the Old Believers were prepared to support any rebellion that offered hope for the restoration of the old faith . . . there could be no doubt that the Old Believers were a threat to tranquility of the state as well as the Church. Sophia understandably became their implacable enemy” (Crummey, 1970:40).

The Great Wave of Immolations. Severe new regulations against the Old Believers were promulgated by Sophia’s government in 1684. Suspected heretics were to be tortured and heretics refusing to recant would be burned at the stake. The movement now went underground; many fled to Poland or sought refuge in remote regions of Russia, which were also favored because of “the dissenters’ own desire to avoid all contact with the world,” which was seen to have, “become contaminated by the presence of Antichrist and the spread of the ‘Nikonian heresies’, and was forever lost

for the Orthodox faith" (Zenkovsky, 1957b:51). "Apocalyptic moods now spread among the persecuted members of the true faith. The coming of Antichrist and the end of the world was imminent. In their religious ecstasy, many of the Old Believers sought the solution of their plight in self-immolation . . . It is estimated that between 1684 and 1691 no less than twenty thousand men and women burned themselves" (Vernadsky, 1969:716).

"The actual mass suicides seem to have generally arisen when armed intervention against a settlement of dissidents appeared to be on the verge of success. The besieged would set fire to buildings in which they had previously strategically placed flammable materials, such that in each of several major incidents 1000-2500 would perish (see Crummey, 1970:39-57).³ In some (but not all) cases the attacks by soldiers on Old Believer strongholds which led to mass suicides were *deliberately provoked by Old Believers*, who seized monasteries and church buildings to force the authorities to send a military force against them so they could be martyred. Martyrdom was sought because it was believed that the apocalypse was imminent and could be hastened by confrontation and purifying immolation. The urge of passive suffering was complimented by a desire, a hunger to fight back against those who had destroyed true religion. Real social and economic grievances of a local nature intensified this spirit of resistance" (Crummey, 1970:51).

But the majority of Old Believers and the leaders opposed such extreme acts. Abbot Dosifei refused to pray for the suicide victims. In 1916, his disciple, Evfrosin, published a tract, "Refutation of the Newly Invented System of Suicide." Subsequently the volume of suicides declined but did not totally cease until 1860 (Cherniavsky, 1970). "Time was on the side of the moderates" as the world failed to end on predicted dates. "The leaders of Old Belief came to see that they would simply have to adjust to continued existence in Antichrist's world" (Crummey, 1970:56). Moreover, as the extremist pro-suicide believers killed themselves, they "left the field to the moderates."

Under Peter the Great, some of the laws against Old Believers were relaxed, although they were expected to pay a double poll tax. Under the leadership of the Denisov brothers, a flourishing center of traditionalist spiritual culture developed in a settlement on the Vyg river. Mining and other economic ventures were pursued profitably and there was even some collaboration with the Peter's regime on certain building projects. "The policy of Peter's government gave the more moderate Old Believers an opportunity to separate themselves from Russian society and build the institutions through which they would preserve the faith" (Crummey, 1970:56-57).⁴

Under the Empress Anna, in the 1730s, there was again a threat of persecution. Apocalyptic sentiments were renewed and Old Believers debated among themselves

3. Crummey (1979:46-55) reports that "According to Old Believer traditions" 1500 to "several" thousand persons perished in each of the three incidents he reports, although he reports other incidents where all the inhabitants of a settlement perished but no numbers are given.

4. Unlike Sophia (whom Peter overthrew in 1687), "Through most of his reign, Peter I attempted to distinguish between those adherents of Old Belief who openly opposed his regime and those whose primary concern was the preservation of the old faith. The distinction cut the ground from under the militant position, for few Old Believers were prepared to kill themselves until agents of Antichrist actively persecuted them in some way" (Crummey, 1970:56-57).

whether the *person* or merely the spirit of Antichrist was rampant in the state, and by implication, whether believers could justifiably pray for the tsar, and thus be safe from persecution (Cherniavsky, 1970). The movement splintered into dozens of sects. But it also grew, and religious restorationism became a basic element in a crystallizing counterculture of anti-tsar and agrarian protest.

Apocalypticism and Political Theology

What led the Old Believers to apocalyptic despair and suicidal frenzy? Vicious persecution was a crucial factor but it cannot explain everything. Firstly, the fierce persecution must be explained. Secondly, the dissidents were themselves *confronting* the authorities, not only by their existence as a schismatic sect denying the validity of the established church in a context of minimal church-state separation, but additionally in terms of their own provocative behavior and their determination to recapture control of the church and extirpate Nikonian heresy.

It is important to realize that freedom of worship for the schismatics and toleration for religious pluralism and non-conformity were hardly the real concern of the early Old Believers. Avvakum and his followers, as well as Nikon and his supporters, believed in One True Church which must inspire and permeate the State. All of the contending parties affirmed an absolute unity of church and state. The problematic for the Avvakumists was therefore not whether they would be “left alone” but whether they could capture the state and thereby undo the impious Nikonian reforms. The Old Believer dissent was thus rather politicized from the outset.

To the Old Believers the Nikonian revisionism implied a condemnation of the Russian historical past which undercut the legitimacy of the whole conceptual foundation of orthodox universalism. The past councils and tsars could not have erred in sanctioning traditional practices. In support of this view the Old Believers evoked the doctrine of “Moscow The Third Rome,” which was also accepted by the Nikonians (Cherniavsky, 1970). The Third Rome doctrine affirmed that, “Moscow was the spiritual capital of Christianity and that her unique and exclusive orthodoxy was historically proven and divinely confirmed. And, as the third Rome was also the last, this meant that Muscovite Orthodoxy was the only currency of the economy of salvation. If Moscow were to fall from grace, betray the faith as had the first two Romes, it would mean not only the fall of Moscow as a state, as divine punishment, but the end of the whole world; a fourth Rome there could not be, and Moscow’s fall would signify the end of the possibility of salvation for all men, and the coming of the last days” (Cherniavsky, 1970:146).

In this context, what conclusion would have been drawn from the tsar and the Patriarch’s persistence in impious innovations which implicitly denied the holy Muscovite past? “There was only one general conclusion possible: if Moscow, the Third Rome, had instituted religious changes which required the condemnation of itself in its own past, then Moscow had accepted heresy—and the end was at hand” (Cherniavsky, 1970:148). “The end” meant the apocalypse: the end of the world subsequent to the second coming of Christ, which is itself preceded by the *reign of Antichrist!*

The conclusion began to surface that Alexis and Nikon were a part of Antichrist, in terms of the apocalyptic vision, a “horn” of Antichrist-as-beast. This was hard to accept, for “nothing could more surely mean the end of the world than the Orthodox

Tsar as a horn of Antichrist. But it made sense, particularly after 1658, when Nikon was gone and the reforms were nonetheless maintained . . . In other words, the conclusion had to be drawn that the apostasy of the tsar was not an accident, temporary and random, but part of an irrevocable divine and satanic process" (Cherniavsky, 1970:149). This notion was cabalistically convenient since the demonic number 666 was reflected in the revisionist council of 1666-67. It is noteworthy, however, that many Old Believers including Avvakum himself drew back from acknowledging that the total end of everything was nigh, "he preferred to emphasize that only the spirit of Antichrist was present—that is, apostasy . . . was not final as long as men were willing to hold out against it" (Cherniavsky 1970:149). But as the attempts to restore the old faith failed, the mood became increasingly apocalyptic.

It was this apocalyptic mood which prepared the more extreme devotees for suicide. The actual suicides were generally precipitated by real or anticipated armed assaults. Their persecution, though vicious, was not entirely arbitrary, and the subversive quality of what Cherniavsky calls the "political theology" of the Old Believers was not the sole impetus to the persecutions. The movement was gaining sympathy from "large sections of the population whose motives were not merely religious but social and political . . . The Old Believers' opposition to authority was potentially the nucleus of a widespread revolutionary movement" (Vernadsky, 1969:696).

To conclude this section, the Old Believer mass suicides appear to be related to the strange interweaving of political and religious elements in their movement. Imprisoned in the Third Rome mystique and the orthodox assumptions about the theocratic role of the tsar, the Old Believers were pushed to elevate their opposition to Nikonian reforms to the level of a subversive political theology, and ultimately to entertain extreme apocalyptic notions which implied the hopelessness of the worldly situation dominated by Antichrist. Moods of both apocalyptic despair and political truculence were intensified by a sequence of ups and downs whereby at various points the Old Believers seemed about to regain control of church policy only to have their stimulated hopes dashed. Meanwhile their heresy was spreading and its politically subversive quality was enhanced by the interface of Old Believer religious restorationism and various currents of social, economic and political protest. Intensified deadly persecution ensued, which further heightened apocalyptic frenzy and suicidal despair and exaltation.

A feedback process of "deviance amplification" (Wallis, 1976) or interaction between escalating persecution and intensifying alienation and deviant protest is clearly evident and culminated in a great wave of mass suicides. However, subsequent "de-amplification" under Peter the Great allowed the development of a prosperous settlement on the Vyg river (Crummey, 1970; Zenkovsky, 1957b).⁵

5. The process whereby the alienation and the apocalyptic frenzy of the Old Believers was intensified, partly in response to enhanced persecution, itself aggravated by the increasing militance and political activism of the Old Believers, is susceptible to analysis in terms of the escalation-feedback model of "deviance amplification" (Wilkins, 1964), which Wallis (1976:205-224) has applied to the conflicts between the Church of Scientology and the British and Australian governments. This model might also be explored with regard to the history of the People's Temple in its final years as opposition to the Temple intensified and was magnified by Jim Jones in phantasy and then further escalated in response to more extreme Temple practices. However, the formal applicability of the model to both cases may obscure the vast difference in the intensity of opposition to the Old Believers compared to the People's Temple. The model may also fail to take into account contextual factors such as the apocalyptic milieu, tsarist despotism and the "Third Rome" premises.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

There are a number of interesting parallels as well as some marked divergences between the experience of the Old Believers and that of the People's Temple in Guyana. The primary areas of partial convergence involve firstly, the deepening of a sectarian mood of apocalyptic pessimism and perceived worldly triumph of evil, which develops in the context of a general apocalyptic cultural climate; and, secondly, the difficulty experienced by each movement in resolving the duality of strident confrontation against the perceived demonic authorities versus consolidation of a religious-utopian communal sanctuary, i.e., each movement appears to have become more volatile as its *political anti-state elements became more prominent*. Before considering these elements, however, some preliminary lesser comparisons must be ventured.

The Old Believer movement was larger than the People's Temple and much more widespread, which was one reason why it survived its mass suicides. Although its initial leaders were clerical-monastic, it picked up a vast amount of support from downtrodden peasants. Similarly, the People's Temple, unlike most other (largely middle class) American "cults" of the 1970s, had a rank and file base of poor (urban minority) participants led by a more educated cleric and middle class colleagues.

Only a minority of Old Believers and Old Believer settlements were involved in mass suicide events. Likewise, People's Temple communities in California were not affected. Presumably the impact of the charisma and putative psychopathology of Jim Jones (Doyle, 1980; Lifton, 1979) made the difference. The leaders of those Old Believer groups which engaged in provocations to elicit a military confrontation tended to be peasants like Ivanov or radicalized former Solovetski monks like Ignatii (Crummey, 1970).

There are allegations by "moderate" Old Believers such as Evfrosin that many of the martyrdoms were *involuntary* because of manipulative and coercive processes within the doomed communities (Crummey, 1970:55-56). Likewise, it is believed that some of the victims of Jonestown were actually murdered or threatened with murder (Doyle, 1980), while even the "genuine suicides" allegedly transpired in a manipulative context.

As we have seen the Avvakumist leaders tended to come from the established monasteries. Similarly, Jim Jones had been a Disciples of Christ minister. Thus, Melton (1985) argues that the People's Temple, unlike many current "cults," was not really a "new religion," but rather represented a degenerated church, an occasional phenomenon which entails a charismatic clergyman leading a congregation in an increasingly violent, authoritarian, divisive or otherwise morally deviant direction. There may be a violent denouement, after which the movement generally disappears. The Old Believers, however, *survived their spectacular mass suicides*, grew and diversified, and gradually achieved a measure of toleration (Crummey, 1970). Here the contrast with the People's Temple is striking.

The Persecution Factor. Persecution, or rather opposition and a perceived threat of intervention from state authorities, were significant precipitating factors for the actual suicidal events with respect to both the Jonestown and the Old Believer holocausts. But here too it is the *contrast* which is particularly striking. The Old Believers were officially criminalized and threatened with death and torture. In contrast, Jim Jones had phantasies of CIA mercenaries or other sinister forces stalking Jonestown in the Guyana jungles (Hall, 1981). Jones used visions of persecution to strengthen his hold over his flock (Hall, 1981). He hired attorney Mark Lane to investigate conspiracies against the People's Temple and Lane dutifully reported a "coordinated campaign" to destroy the Temple that involved a number of federal agencies including the CIA, IRS, etc. (Hall, 1981). Yet Jones and his devotees were better able to believe these fantastic tales because the Temple did possess actual documentary evidence of FBI and police infiltration of radical black militant groups involving agents provocateurs (Hall, 1981). Intervention against the Temple was slowly escalating. Naipaul (1980) argues that the Concerned Relatives and defectors share some responsibility for the final denouement. They knew about the "white nights" of suicide rehearsal, and yet they insisted on a spectacular expedition led by a congressman which would put Jones' back to the wall. "Their hysteria goaded it to extinction . . . They feared [mass suicide] . . . and yet, by their words and actions, they helped create the conditions in which it could take place" (Naipaul, 1981:156).

Jones and his opponents viewed each other as demonic. "On both sides the battle raged out of control" (Naipaul, 1981:156). The advent of Congressman Ryan was perceived by Jones as the forerunner of more decisive intervention, which was seen as an immediate certainty after Jones had ascertained that devotees had gone to kill Congressman Ryan at the local airport. Thus, both the Jones' followers and the suicidal Old Believers *were certain that the immediate alternative to suicide was falling into the hands of hostile interventionist forces representing absolute evil.*

Persecution of the Old Believers was more tangible and vicious, but the contrast should not be exaggerated. The brutal edicts of Sophia's regime could not be totally enforced in such a big land. Remote sanctuary for dissidents was possible, but some Old Believers, convinced that the Last Days were at hand, devalued safe sanctuary and sought martyrdom through overt rebellion. The real influence of the persecution factor was in shaping devotees' perceptions of the (demonic) state, which, "applied specific pressures to the Old Believers and elicited from them the specific responses which formed the foundation of their political theory and practice . . ." (Crummey, 1970:xiii).

Apocalyptic Climates

Beyond the ambiguous factor of persecution, one striking convergence appears to entail a climate of apocalyptic expectation. In the case of both the Old Believers and the People's Temple sectarian apocalyptic visions developed in the context of *broader cultural and subcultural climates of apocalyptic expectation.*

The apocalyptic mood in Russia can be dated as early as 1644, when the government's printing office published the *Book of Cyrill*, a collection of Ukrainian

and South Slavic apocalyptic writings, which sold—incredibly for its period—500 copies in one month. Apocalyptic thought is associated with the Kapitonists, who expected an imminent apocalypse and who are linked to the earliest pre-Old Believer instances of self-immolation. “By the 1640s, then, there was a certain mood or ideology of insecurity, of rejection, in which men associated the evil they were rejecting or fleeing from, with the Tsar. And the ideology of the early *Raskol* intersected with if it did not draw upon, this mood” (Cherniavsky, 1970:152-153).

Cherniavsky notes that the reforming Patriarch Nikon, after his break with Tsar Alexis in 1658, became apocalyptic and “began to sound very much like Avvakum.” “Nikon’s logic paralleled that of Kapiton and Avvakum within a general apocalyptic mood. The end of the world was near, and the responsibility for this cataclysm lay with the Tsar, whose power was spreading into new areas or was no longer legitimate in areas where it had once prevailed” (Cherniavsky, 1970:155). The dissidents’ apocalyptic political theology focused rather exclusively on Antichrist and was not concerned with subsequent developments such as the Second Coming of Christ.

American Apocalypticism. A similar theme of apocalyptic world rejection can be seen in the United States, in both the ideology of the People’s Temple and the general cultural milieu of the late 1960s through the present. “The apocalyptic mentality is very strong today in American society at large. The invention of the atomic bomb began the current apocalyptic mood, and one of several more recent manifestations of it is the powerful concern with pollution of the environment” (Enroth, Ericson and Peters, 1972:182). According to Robert Lifton, the nuclear “imagery of extinction” has encouraged a surge of apocalyptic and cultic movements expressing a “symbolization of immortality” (Lifton, 1985). The apocalypticism of the radical counter-culture of the late 60s and early 70s expressed the view that American government and society is beyond reformation and must be destroyed and supplanted by something new.

By the late 70s the radical counter-culture had faded; however, sociologist William Martin recently (1982) described the “growing interest in apocalyptic prophecy” and the thematizing of the “last days” by television evangelists such as Oral Roberts, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and Rex Humbard, as well as by best selling works such as Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which has sold over 15 million copies. “No hard data are available, but millions of American evangelicals apparently believe that within the present generation . . . Jesus will return to lay the groundwork for a glorious thousand-year reign on earth” (Martin, 1982:30).

The return of Christ is to be preceded by the reign of Antichrist (Great Tribulation), who is expected to gain prominence by military victory over evil forces in the Middle East. Antichrist will be worshipped by a religion organized by the miracle-working False Prophet. During the Tribulation a world government under Antichrist “will seek total control over humanity by requiring that every person wear a mark or a number (probably 666—the designated ‘Mark of the Beast’, Revelation 13:16-18) in order to buy or sell. Those who refuse to accept this Mark of the Beast will be slain or will risk starvation because they cannot buy food. Those who accept it will burn

forever in Hell” (Martin, 1982:32).

In many quarters, the focus seems to be directed primarily to the nuances of the advent of Antichrist rather than the actual Second Coming and post-apocalyptic bliss. The rise of computers, credit cards and gargantuan shopping malls and supermarkets have been seen as foreshadowing the 666 commercial control system, as the rise of “cults,” gay rights, the mental health movement, ecumenism and the United Nations has been perceived as anticipating the machinations of Antichrist’s World Government and the False Prophets’ depraved anti-religion. Contemporary crises in the Mideast, the nuclear menace, Russian aggression and other traumas have appeared to demonstrate that “pieces of the puzzle are falling into place” and the shape of the imminent fulfillment of apocalyptic prophecy is becoming visible. Martin notes the speculation in the 1970s that Henry Kissinger might be Antichrist and that the Trilateral Commission and the Council on Foreign Relations were “mighty engines of the one-world Antichrist conspiracy” (Martin, 1982:35-6).

Apocalypticism of Jim Jones. Contemporary apocalypticism is not entirely associated with the political “right.” A strident radical countercultural apocalypticism flourished in the late 1960s and early 1970s and partly converged with some variants of contemporary Christian tribulationism in its preoccupation with the enviroing reign of evil. Demonic evocations of “Amerika” were featured in the left-wing apocalypticism of the radical counter-culture and the various quasi-marxist and black militant sects.

“Jim Jones” notes Shiva Naipaul, “built his movement on the debris of the sixties: on its frustrations, failures and apostasies” (Naipaul, 1980:293). As Jones relocated his movement in San Francisco and subsequently moved to Guyana, the radical counterculture, the anti-war protest and even the broad agitation against racism was winding down. But, as a tide of fervent sentiment and activism recedes, it often leaves frenzied little pools and eddies. Some of the people caught up in the flamboyant counterculture and the exotic “hippie” scene ultimately joined relatively authoritarian and structured communal “cults.” Some counterculturalists and radical “New Left” activists ended up involved in violent paramilitary groups such as the later Weathermen or the Symbionese Liberation Army.

As the People’s Temple, originally an evangelical church group with an anti-racist social activist record, evolved, Jones picked up and sharpened certain themes of radical protest which he extrapolated in an increasingly apocalyptic and pessimistic direction. “He and the Temple aristocracy assiduously unearthed every reference to the Ku Klux Klan and the Nazis that they could find and constructed out of them a vision of unavoidable genocidal doom” (Naipaul, 1980:305). “Jones tortured his black followers with nightmare visions of fascist takeover and genocidal doom” (Naipaul, 1980:288). He dealt in radically dualistic evocations of an absolutely evil and doomed America. A Nazi takeover was imminent and only the Temple were aware of the threat and were standing up to it. Growing economic distress and social unrest would enable a right-wing demagogue to seize power. Hitlerian genocidal policies were going to be repeated. In California, “The People’s Temple would stage mock lynchings of blacks by the Ku Klux Klan as a form of political theater: (Hall,

1981:183). Black members were persuaded that if they did not go with Jones to Guyana, they would surely end up in concentration camps where they would be killed" (Krause, Stern, and Harwood, 1978:188).

But the People's Temple was hardly the exclusive locus of this kind of apocalypticism. On the very day, November 18, 1978, of the Jonestown holocaust, Huey Newton, the former Black Panther leader, was giving a speech to a group of students in Boston. " 'We, the people' he was telling those students, 'are threatened with genocide because racism and fascism are rampant in the country and throughout the world' " (Naipaul, 1980:288). For over a decade black agitators such as Malcolm X and George Jones had talked of an emerging American Fascism and the possibility of the white ruling class accepting a Hitleresque genocidal solution to deepening racial conflict.

A distinctly manichean and pessimistic apocalypticism thus characterized the evolving radicalism of the People's Temple, which paralleled the broader radical and "anti-racist" ideological milieu. But the convergence of Jones' apocalypticism and the environing apocalypticism is not merely a matter of the frenzy of certain radical left and black militant activists. "Jim Jones was as much a Protestant fundamentalist as he was a 'Marxist,' " argues Naipaul, "The traditions, atmosphere and techniques of Protestant fundamentalism were all present in the People's Temple," and they can also be found in the more extreme late 70s ecological agitation (Naipaul, 1980:294). The content of different movements' prophecies may vary but there is a vital convergence of form and imagination. There is a similar obsession with evil, sin and images of apocalyptic destruction, a similar impulse to divide humanity into the few saved and the many damned, and a similar persuasive tactic based on evoking anxiety.

Jones' prophecy converged with that of the tribulationists in terms of a vision of an imminent holocaust amidst a triumph of evil and corruption in the world. Our present troubles defy solution. America is doomed! Yet, the Christian tribulationists are at least certain of post-apocalyptic bliss in which the faithful will participate. Jones was vague on this score. According to John Hall, "Jones' prophecy was far more radical than those of contemporary Adventist groups: he focused on imminent apocalyptic disaster rather than on Christ's millennial salvation, and his eschatology, therefore, had to resolve a choice between apocalyptic struggle with 'the beast' or collective flight to establish a post-apocalyptic kingdom of the elect. Until the end, the People's Temple was directed toward the latter possibility" (Hall, 1981:175). The conflict between the need to create an insulated communal refuge where the faithful could be safe from the demonic environment and live according to the truth and the impulse to militantly confront demonic authorities bedeviled both the People's Temple and the Old Believers, and will be discussed in the next section (see below). To conclude this section, however, a qualification must be entered.

The apocalyptic mood of Russia preceded the *Raskol*, nevertheless, the Old Believers and the great reaction against the Nikonian reforms were instrumental in spreading and deepening the apocalyptic mood in Russia and crystallizing an ongoing insurrectionary counter-culture of religious restorationism and agrarian protest. In contrast, Jonestown appears to have been a dead-end and may have marked the *climax* of radical countercultural apocalypticism in the United States.

Political Confrontation and Religious Sanctuary

The most important similarity between Jonestown and the Old Believer suicides entails a pattern of interweaving political and religious elements in each movement and its situation such that *strident confrontation or perceived confrontation with an overpowering enemy undermined the precarious co-existence with the dominant authorities which even radical world-rejecting sects usually work out.*

Analysis of the Jonestown Trauma. An important analysis of the Peoples Temple movement and the Jonestown Massacre has been published by sociologist John Hall (1981). In many ways the characteristics of the Peoples Temple Community at Jonestown correspond to the model of what Hall calls an *other-worldly sect*, which "is a utopian communal group that subscribes to a comprehensive set of beliefs based on an apocalyptic interpretation of current history. The world of society-at-large is seen as totally evil, in its last days, at the end of history as we know it. It is to be replaced by a community of the elect—those who live according to revelation of God's will" (Hall, 1981:173). "In this millennial Kingdom, those closest to God come to rule . . . typically a preeminent prophet or Messiah, who is legitimated by charisma or tradition, calls the shots in a theocratic organization of God's chosen people" (Hall, 1981:174).⁶

Other worldly sects have existed throughout history, generally without mass suicide events. Thus disciplinary practices and the authoritarian, collectivist life-process at Jonestown are not really unusual from a historical perspective. Given the widespread occurrence of other-worldly sects, "the other-worldly features of Jonestown are insufficient in themselves to explain the bizarre fate of its participants. If we are to understand the unique turn of events at Jonestown, we must look at certain distinctive features of the People's Temple—traits that make it unusual among other-worldly sects—we must try to comprehend the subjective meanings of these features for some of Jonestown's participants" (Hall, 1981:180).

According to Hall, other-worldly sects tend to develop a de-facto *modus vivendi* with the environing state and society, which they believe to be totally depraved and doomed. The believers conclude that they can more or less ignore the evil society, from which they may be geographically isolated, or which is viewed as unwilling or unable to crush the community of the true faith. Given this assumption, the movement is less likely to act in a manner to provoke the putatively collapsing society. The chaos of the disintegrating and depraved culture cannot impinge on the utopian community or "holy remnant" which is "saved" and thus under divine protection or some other sheltering umbrella.

Hall's analysis of Jonestown stresses the strange interweaving of political and "other-worldly" sectarian elements in the outlook of Jim Jones and his followers. Their Manichean political orientation undercut the consolidation of an "other-

6. In our view, Hall's use of the term "other worldly" is misleading, as it implies a supernaturalist, theist or transcendental-mystical outlook. What Hall is really pointing to is a utopian-sectarian pattern involving a stable communal enclave legitimated in terms of a "post-apocalyptic" mystique which devalues the inevitability or priority of active confrontation with an evil and perhaps doomed environing society.

worldly sanctuary” or sacred heaven-on-earth retreat which is fundamental to the survival and stability of other-worldly sects. The latter “promise the grace of a theocracy in which followers can sometimes really escape the ‘living hell’ of society-at-large. Many of the Reverend Jones’ followers seem to have joined the People’s Temple with this in mind” (Hall, 1981:186). However, the racial ideology of the movement, the acute concern over defectors, and the evocation of a “conspiracy” allegedly forming around the defectors and involving the U.S. government and CIA, produced in the minds of the leader and his faithful a *sense of persecution which was too immediate and pressing to be compatible with consolidation of a stable sectarian enclave*. . . “Rather than successfully proclaiming the post-apocalyptic sanctuary, Jones was reduced to declaiming a web of ‘evil’ powers in which he was ensnared and to searching with chiliastic expectation for the imminent cataclysm that would announce the beginning of the Kingdom of righteousness” (Hall, 1981:186).

Thus, Jones had not really built a “post-apocalyptic heavenly plateau” for his followers. Was Jonestown the Promised Land? This was becoming uncertain. “Jones did not entirely trust the Guyanese government, and he was considering seeking final asylum in Cuba or the Soviet Union. Whereas other-worldly sects typically assert that heaven is at hand, Jones could only hold it out as a future goal—one that became more and more elusive as the forces of persecution tracked him to Guyana.” Hope was running out because, as Jones saw it, he was fighting an “evil and conspiratorial world that could not tolerate a living example of a racially integrated American Utopia” (Hall, 1981:186).

Although it shared many qualities with an other-worldly sect, the People’s Temple is depicted in Hall’s analysis as existing on the boundary between an other-worldly sect and a “warring sect.” The latter defines itself as “fighting a decisive Manichean struggle with the forces of evil. Such a struggle seems almost inevitable when political rather than religious themes of evil. Such a struggle seems almost inevitable when political rather than religious themes of apocalypse are stressed” (Hall, 1981:186-87). Violent political groups including revolutionary and “terrorist” groups are warring sects. Frequently Jones and his associates acted within the militant frame of reference of a warring sect, e.g., they surrounded the settlement with armed guards and staged mock CIA attacks on Jonestown. Lifton (1968) notes that revolutionaries engage in a quest for immortality. “Other-worldly sectarians short-circuit this quest in a way by the fiat of *asserting* their immortality—posting the timeless heavenly plateau that exists *beyond* history as the basis of their everyday lives. But under the persistent eyes of external critics and because Jones himself exploited such ‘persecution’ to increase his social control, he could not sustain the illusion of other-worldly community” (Hall, 1981:187).

The growing intensity of the conspiratorial anti-imperialistic and anti-racist elements in the People’s Temple’s worldview diminished the viability of the movement as a world-rejecting sect. By emphasizing the persecution of his group by an omnipotent conspiracy, Jones undermined the feeling of autonomy and insulation vital to stabilizing its identity. Yet the movement could not become an authentic warring sect, since it clearly could not envision itself gaining a victory over a “conspiracy” which was increasingly conceptualized as *all-powerful*. With “revolutionary immortality” and sectarian “post-apocalyptic” immortality closed off, the

immortality of exemplary mass sacrifice became the only form of immortality available. "Mass suicide bridged the divergent threads of meaningful existence at Jonestown—those of political revolution and religious salvation. It was an awesome vehicle for a powerful statement of collective solidarity by the true believers among the people of Jonestown—they would rather die together than have their lives together subjected to gradual decimation and dishonor at the hands of authorities regarded as illegitimate" (Hall, 1981:188). Similarly, what Zenkovsky calls the "psychology of martyrdom" among Old Believers, propelled thousands "to burn themselves rather than submit to the state, which they now considered possessed by Antichrist" (Zenkovsky, 1963:40).

Comparison With The Old Believers. The People's Temple, in Hall's analysis, could not resolve the antinomy of seeking a safe refuge from a putatively vicious society and stridently confronting the authorities, who were perceived as reaching out powerful tentacles to crush their refuge such that confrontation was unavoidable. There is some convergence with Crummey's analysis of the Old Believer mass suicides.

Many of the adherents encapsulated their hatred of everything new and oppressive in Russian life in the apocalyptic symbol of Antichrist. The symbol and the mood it expressed demanded resistance to the state and the official church—the instruments of Antichrist. For in both symbolic and practical terms, the faithful were not to submit to his power.

The logic of this position, then, led the Old Believers to a confrontation of the power of the imperial government. The overwhelming weight of their adversary, however, posed an agonizing problem of strategy. How could the faithful best make a stand against the legions of Antichrist? (Crummey, 1970:210).

The belief that the Last Days were at hand conferred a premium on confrontation. If the end of the world was at hand, then, "there was no need for concern about the continuance of the true faith. It was, therefore, justifiable for the faithful to strike a satisfying blow at the enemy and meet their inevitable fate, sword in hand" (Crummey, 1970:220).⁷

Among both the suicidal Old Believers and Jones' followers belief in an imminent apocalyptic demiurge devalued the idea of a permanent sectarian refuge as an essential base to conserve or propagate the true faith. In both cases mass suicide

7. According to Crummey, the Old Believers had three options: armed revolt, flight to some hidden refuge or "construction of fortress communities that would rally and shelter the defenders of the old faith" (Crummey, 1970:219). Mass suicides arose as an aspect of the first option when "rebellion blended with mass suicide" (Crummey, 1970:219), and also as an outcome when flight did not avail and some hitherto hidden community was detected and assaulted. The third option seemed attractive "when it became clear that Antichrist's reign would continue into the indefinite future"; however, "the arm of the state was long" and the leaders of the Vyg community "had no choice but to reach a *modus vivendi* with the imperial Government" (Crummey, 1970:21), which, under Peter I, was prepared to relax its persecution somewhat. Thus, the sectarians finally attained Hall's "post-apocalyptic plateau."

really arose as a final affirmation of non-submission to an authority which was perceived as absolutely evil but absolutely powerful in the (doomed) world. In both cases, *the possibility of an insulated sanctuary was relinquished in behalf of a final violent confrontation*, although surviving Old Believers ultimately opted, under new leaders and a more tolerant tsar, for communal sanctuary at the Vyg river settlement.

One further point: Both the People's Temple and the Old Believers combined political-revolutionary and world-rejecting sectarian tendencies. As both movements evolved the former elements became increasingly prominent. This was particularly striking in the case of the People's Temple, whose leader, a protestant minister, eventually renounced theism. Although the Avvakumist dissent was somewhat political from the outset, nevertheless, the Old Believers became increasingly politically activist and insurgent over a period of roughly thirty years and became increasingly obsessed with the state and tsar as demonic forces.

Professor Hall's analysis thus directs our attention to movements which uneasily combine "political" and "religious" elements within an apocalyptic framework. The Unification movement, whose "messianic prophecy . . . is defined in political terms" (Robbins and Anthony, 1984:18) represents one controversial group which fits this specification. On the other hand, the Unificationist mood is hardly one of pessimistic despair (Anthony and Robbins, 1981-82). Perhaps a greater volatility can be found in the emerging "cults of the 1980s" (Levin and Alan, 1985) which recruit from urban minorities who do not feel part of the economic recovery and patriotic revitalization. Groups such as MOVE (Quinn, 1985) do indeed seem to court violent confrontations while simultaneously directing some effort to a somewhat contradictory attempt to develop a utopian communal refuge.

CONCLUSION

An exploratory comparison has been ventured between the sixteenth century Old Believer mass suicides and the recent Jonestown deaths of over 900 devotees of the People's Temple's movements. Striking parallels as well as significant differences have been found. The basic convergence involves a continual intensification of a mood of pessimistic apocalypticism and despairing conviction of the triumph of evil in a doomed world. This sectarian conviction is related to a generally apocalyptic mood in the broader culture and/or in an intermovement subculture. A second partial convergence entails a gradual intensification of political and anti-statist elements in the ideology of what was originally primarily a religious movement or protest, such that the impulse stridently to confront dominant authorities and to perceive these authorities as demonic and conspiring to actively crush the movement undermined the possibility of a de-facto *modus vivendi* with the state. In such an accommodation, an alienated sect attains a "post-apocalyptic sanctuary" in which devotees can in their view operationalize spiritual and communal perfection while being tolerated or benignly neglected by the putatively depraved and doomed society. Such a refuge was eventually crystallized by the Old Believers at the Vyg settlement.

There was a significant divergence, however, in the way the sequence of deepening alienation-persecution or "deviance amplification" worked itself out with re-

spect to each group. The Old Believers suffered extreme persecution, which however, was at least aggravated by their own strident confrontation of the regime through their increasing political activism and their growing connections with other dangerous forces of social and political protest. The deadly persecution of the People's Temple, however, was large *phantasized* by Jones et. al., although there was increasing opposition to the movement and pressure for some sort of intervention. The strident confrontationist tendency of the People's Temple manifested itself in "paranoid" phantasies of conspiratorial persecution, which rather than an actual threat of physical coercion, drove the leader and his colleagues to frenzy and despair. It is also notable that, unlike the People's Temple, the Old Believers survived their mass deaths, and in the Vyg community they found what Hall would call their "post-apocalyptic plateau."⁸

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8. The Old Believer suicides must ultimately be seen in cultural context. Murvar (1975) sees both the Avvakumists and the Kapitons as part of a distinctly Russian tradition of dissident messianic absolutism which includes the later "revolutionary messianism" of the nineteenth century populists and the twentieth century Bolsheviks. But the suicides of the Old Believers can also be seen as reflecting an older tradition beginning with "voluntary" martyrdoms among Christians during the Roman persecutions (Burkhardt, 1949; Dodds, 1965;)and continuing in Byzantine times when, in the reign of Justinian, the persecuted Phrygian Montanists "locked themselves into churches and burned themselves to death rather than fall into the hands of their fellow-Christians" (Dodds, 1965:67). The image of Christ-on-the-cross may be seen to suggest a sacrificial, life-relinquishing response to persecution whereby martyrs imitate the passion of Christ. This imagery, which surely influenced the Old Believers, may also have meant something to Reverend Jim Jones.

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