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*Imagining
Religion*

From Babylon to Jonestown

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7 The Devil in Mr. Jones

I

My starting point in this essay will be three curious titles that are attached by my university to my name: "religion and the human sciences," "religion and the humanities," "history of religions." What might these terms mean? All three set religion within a context. All three suggest limiting perspectives on religion: that it is human and that it is historical (two propositions that I understand to be all but synonymous). All three suggest academic conversation partners for the enterprise of the study of religion: anthropology (in its broadest sense), humanities, and history. These terms locate the *study* of religion. Religion, to the degree that it is usefully conceived as an historical, human endeavor, is to be set within the larger academic frameworks provided by anthropology, the humanities, and history.

All three titles are, as well, highly polemical. Although their daring has been obscured by time, none would have been understood in academic circles a little more than a century ago. Indeed, if understood at all, they would have been thought to embody a contradiction. Although we tend to use the word "humanities" (or the human sciences) as synonymous with liberal learning, with Cicero's *humanitas* and the older Greek *paideia*, and tend to identify its scope primarily with the study of the classical culture of our own past and the more recent works dependent on it, this is not its primary academic sense. When it was revived by the Italian humanists of the fifteenth century, it had a more pointed and argumentative meaning. As first used by Coluccio Salutati, a Florentine chancellor, "humane studies," the "human sciences" were to be contrasted with the "divine sciences"—that is to say, the humanities with theology. Thus, if the study of religion was anything, it was the study of that which was utterly different from the human sciences. The two were perceived to be mutually exclusive.

This was all changed when, on 1 October 1877, the Dutch Universities Act separated the theological faculties at the four state universities (Amsterdam, Groningen, Leiden, and Utrecht) from the Dutch Reformed

Church. For the first time in western academic history, there were established two, parallel possibilities for the study of religion: a humanistic mode within the secular academy and a theological course of study within the denominational seminary. The original draft of the legislation had used a term coined four years earlier, proposing to call the new university department a "Faculty of Religious Sciences," but, after much compromise, the older title, "Faculty of Theology," was retained. Nevertheless, dogmatics and practical theology, the central core of theological education, were removed from the curriculum, to be taught only in the seminaries. Their place in the academy was taken by a new program in history of religions which was assumed to be more "neutral and scientific."

France followed soon after. In 1884 the French Ministry of Education abolished the state Catholic Theological Faculties and a year later replaced them (in the very same building) by the "Fifth Section of Religious Sciences" as part of the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*. Religious study was added alongside the other four "sections": mathematics, physics and chemistry, natural history and physiology, and the historical and philological sciences. The minister of public instruction charged the new faculty: "We do not wish to see the cultivation of polemics, but of critical research. We wish to see the examination of texts, not the discussion of dogmas."

In 1904 the University of Manchester, which was rare among British universities in being nondenominational and in applying no confessional tests to either students or faculty, established its new Theological Faculty which taught theological subjects and comparative religions but excluded courses in systematic theology and the history of Christian doctrine. All theological students were required to take work in comparative religions. What was intended may be gleaned from the fact that James George Frazer was invited to join the faculty and teach comparative religions. As stated at the inauguration of this new program, this was "the first occasion in this country on which theology, unfettered by [denominational] tests, has been accepted as an integral part of the University organization and has been treated like any other subject."¹ Rarely did any other European country until today follow this pattern. In most of Europe, religious studies were part of the divine sciences.

In the United States, until some twenty years ago, when religious studies were recognized, a sequential pattern prevailed. A doctoral degree in religious studies at a university had as its prerequisite a bachelor of divinity degree from a seminary. It was not until the rise of programs in state universities, a development which followed the 1963 U.S. Supreme Court decision on the *School District of Abington v. Schempp*, in which Mr. Justice Goldberg observed, "it seems clear to me . . . that the Court would recognize the propriety of the teaching *about* religion as distin-

guished from the teaching of religion in the public schools," that the parallel course of religious studies in the academy, instituted a century ago in Holland, became possible in this country.

This political and legislative history, as important as it has been, should not be allowed to obscure a more fundamental base. Simply put, *the academic study of religion is a child of the Enlightenment*. This intellectual heritage is revealed in the notion of generic religion as opposed to historical, believing communities. But it is not this element, as significant as it was, on which I wish to dwell. Rather it is the mood, the exemplary Enlightenment attitude toward religion that concerns me.

To put the matter succinctly, religion was domesticated; it was transformed from *pathos* to *ethos*. At no little cost, religion was brought within the realm of common sense, of civil discourse and commerce. Rediscovering the old tag, "Nothing human is foreign to me," the Enlightenment impulse was one of tolerance and, as a necessary concomitant, one which refused to leave any human datum, including religion, beyond the pale of understanding, beyond the realm of reason.

It was this impulse, this domestication, that made possible the entrance of religious studies into the secular academy. But the price of this entry, to reverse the Steppenwolf formula, is the use of our mind. As students of religion, we have become stubbornly committed to making the attempt (even if we fail) at achieving intelligibility. We must accept the burden of the long, hard road of understanding. To do less is to forfeit our license to practice in the academy, to leave the study of religion open to the charge of incivility and intolerance.

Against this background, I have deliberately chosen for my topic an event which is a scandal in the original sense of the word. Such scandals erupt from time to time and perturb the assumptions of civility. For the Enlightenment faith in intelligibility, it was the shock over the utter devastation of the Lisbon earthquake on 1 November 1755—reread Voltaire's *Candide*!² For those of us committed to the academic study of religion, a comparable scandal is that series of events which began at approximately 5:00 P.M., on 18 November 1978 in Jonestown, Guyana. From one point of view, one might claim that Jonestown was the most important single event in the history of religions, for if we continue, as a profession, to leave it ununderstandable, then we will have surrendered our rights to the academy. The daring and difficult experiment in parallel courses of religious study begun in Holland a century ago will have concluded in failure.

One final, preliminary matter. To interpret, to venture to understand, is not necessarily to approve or to advocate. There is a vast difference between what I have described as "tolerance" and what is now known as "relativism." The former does not necessarily lead to the latter. In the

sixteenth century, that great precursor of the Enlightenment, Montaigne, argued in his essay "Of Cannibals":

Everyone terms barbarity, whatever is not of his own customs; in truth it seems that we have no view of what is true and reasonable, except the example and idea of the customs and practices of the country in which we live. We may call them barbarians, then, if we are judging by the rules of reason, but not if we are judging by comparison with ourselves, who surpass them in every sort of barbarity.³

He was stating a principle of toleration, but he was also making a normative claim: we cannot judge another culture by reference to ourselves; we may judge (both another and ourselves), if our criteria are universal "rules of reason." The anthropology of the last century, the study of religions in the academy, has contributed to making more difficult a naive, ethnocentric formulation of the "rules of reason," but this does not require that such "rules" be denied, or suggest that we should slacken in our attempts to formulate them.

It is a far cry from the civility of Montaigne and his Enlightenment heirs to the utter conceptual relativism of D. Z. Phillips when he writes, in *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*:

If I hear that one of my neighbors has killed another neighbor's child, given that he is sane, my condemnation is immediate. . . . But if I hear that some remote tribe practices child sacrifice, what then? I do not know what sacrifice means for the tribe in question. What would it mean to say I condemned it when the "it" refers to something I know nothing about? I would be condemning murder. But murder is not child sacrifice.⁴

If the *skandalon* of Jonestown requires that we make the effort of understanding, it requires as well that, as members of the academy, we side with Montaigne against Phillips. For fundamental to the latter's conceptual relativism is the claim that, "what counts as true in my language may not even be able to be described in yours. Translation becomes impossible in principle."⁵ But if this be the case, the academy, the enterprise of understanding, the human sciences themselves, become, likewise, impossible in principle since they are fundamentally translation enterprises.

II

The basic facts concerning Jonestown that are matters of public record may be rapidly rehearsed.⁶ James Warren Jones was born 13 May 1931 in the small town of Lynn, Indiana. Like many other towns of the region and of the time, Lynn was a seat of both Christian fundamentalism and Ku Klux Klan activity. (The Klan's national headquarters had been in Indianapolis.) There is considerable evidence that by the late forties Jones

was deeply committed to the former and had decisively rejected the latter in favor of a vision of racial equality and harmony. In 1950, Jones (now married), moved to Indianapolis and, although not ordained, became a pastor at the Sommerset Southside Church and director of an integrated community center. In difficulty with the Sommerset congregation for his outspoken views on civil rights, he left and, by 1953, had founded his own, interracial Community Unity Church, largely subsidized by his efforts, including the door-to-door peddling of pet monkeys. For a while he also served as associate pastor of the Laurel Street Tabernacle, but, again, his integrationist views forced him out. In 1956, he founded the Peoples Temple, an integrated but predominantly black congregation. He also began the practice of adopting children of various races (he was to adopt a total of seven) and urging his congregants to do so as well. Moving to larger quarters, he began his visits to a variety of evangelists, the most significant being a trip to Philadelphia to talk with Father Divine. By 1960, his efforts in community work had become so well known that he was appointed director of the Indianapolis Human Rights Commission, and articles about him began to appear in the press. In 1961, the Peoples Temple Full Gospel Church became affiliated with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and, in 1964, Jones was ordained a minister by that denomination. In this same period, Jones appears to have introduced more discipline into his congregation (e.g., establishing an "interrogation committee") and to have begun to practice increasingly vivid forms of faith healing; he claimed that he had resurrected a number of dead individuals (by 1972, he would claim to have resurrected more than forty) and that he was able to cure cancer. (This latter led to an investigation by the state of Indiana, but the results were inconclusive.)

In 1965, after reading an article on nuclear destruction in *Esquire Magazine*, Jones predicted the end of the world in a nuclear holocaust which would occur on 15 July 1967. Concerned for the society that would emerge after this event, he sought to find sanctuary for a small, interracial remnant. The magazine mentioned ten places as the safest from destruction, including Belo Horizonte, Brazil, and Ukiah, California. Jones visited Brazil, meeting with several of the leaders of messianic cults there as well as stopping off in Guyana on his return. He then moved about 150 members of his congregation from Indianapolis to Ukiah, incorporating the Peoples Temple, Disciples of Christ Church in November 1965. He began a pattern of commuting between his Indianapolis and his California congregations, but increasingly concentrated his activities in Redwood Valley.

By 1967, Jones was an important civic institution in northern California. Several officials had joined his church. He was the chairman of the local Legal Services Society and foreman of the Mendocino Grand Jury.

By 1972, he had expanded his activities, founding churches in San Francisco and Los Angeles. He published a newspaper, *The People's Forum*, which had a press run of 60,000 copies, and had a half-hour radio program, each week, on KFAX. In 1973, he leased 27,000 acres of undeveloped land from the government of Guyana to serve as an "agricultural mission" and a "promised land."

By 1974, his combined California congregations had grown to such a degree that the *Sacramento Bee* declared, "Peoples Temple ranks as probably the largest Protestant congregation in Northern California," and Jones became an important political force. Still combining his preaching of racial equality with services of healing, Jones began to speak to, and attract, a different audience. While still predominantly a black and working class congregation, he also brought into Peoples Temple a new, white, liberal, educated, middle class membership. In 1975, he was named one of the hundred most outstanding clergymen in the United States by *Religion in Life*. He also worked for the political campaign of San Francisco mayor, George Moscone, and entered into the center of West Coast politics. Visibly active in support of freedom of the press causes, he received, in 1976, the *Los Angeles Herald's* Humanitarian of the Year award. He became active in the presidential campaign of Carter, turning out a huge audience for Rosalynn Carter's appearance; he was later invited by her to the inauguration and corresponded with her in the White House.

Appointed to the San Francisco Housing Authority by Moscone in 1976, he became its chairman in 1977, and received the Martin Luther King Humanitarian of the Year award in San Francisco that year.

Although there had been a few "exposés" of Peoples Temple (most notably a planned eight-part series by Lester Kinsolving in the *San Francisco Examiner* in 1972, which was suppressed after four installments had appeared), it was not until the 1 August 1977 issue of *New West Magazine* with its lurid reports of financial misdealings, beatings, intimidation, brainwashing, and hints of murder that another side of Peoples Temple came into public view. After an unsuccessful attempt to have the story quashed, Jones left for Guyana.

The mission in Guyana had been run, since its establishment, by a skeleton crew. In 1975, there were only 15 members in Jonestown. By 1976, when California's lieutenant governor visited the site, there were some 50 individuals. In May 1977, there were 70 full-time residents. Between late July and December 1977, Jones and some 900 other congregants had moved to Jonestown. A core of about 100 members was left behind to staff the California churches and provide logistical support for the community in Guyana.

Between 1 April and 7 November 1978, there was a flurry of legal actions. Former cult members entered lawsuits against Peoples Temple

charging assault and fraud. There were investigations by the San Francisco district attorney's office and by the United States consul in Guyana. Relatives of citizens of Jonestown began making public statements, charging violations of human rights and mistreatment in Jonestown. In June, a former Temple official filed an affidavit to the effect that Jones had assumed "a tyrannical hold over the lives of Temple members," that he had become paranoid and was planning "mass suicide for the glory of socialism." In the same month, James Cobb filed suit against Jones in San Francisco, charging him with planning "mass murder [that] would result in the death of minor children not old enough to make voluntary and informed decisions about serious matters of any nature, much less insane proposals of collective suicide."

On 14 November 1978, Congressman Leo Ryan, of California, left for Guyana to investigate the situation, accompanied by fourteen relatives of Jonestown citizens and representatives of the press. On the afternoon of 17 November, and the morning of the next day, Ryan visited Jonestown and interviewed a number of the Peoples Temple members. A small number indicated that they wished to leave with him, but, in the main, Ryan was positively impressed.

At 4:00 P.M. on the afternoon of 18 November, after having been threatened with a knife in Jonestown, Ryan and four members of his party were shot to death while waiting to board their chartered plane. Eleven members of his party were wounded. Their assailants were members of the Jonestown community.

About an hour later, Jones began the "White Night," an event that had been previously rehearsed, the suicide of every member of Peoples Temple in Jonestown. When it was over, 914 people had died, most by taking a fruit drink mixed with cyanide and tranquilizers; most apparently died voluntarily. (Four individuals, including Jones, died of gunshot wounds. The bodies of some 70 individuals showed puncture wounds which suggest that they were injected with poison—whether voluntarily or not cannot be determined. Two hundred and sixty infants and small children had been administered poison, most by their parents. Dogs, livestock, and fishponds had been poisoned as well.)

Some one hundred of the inhabitants of Jonestown, the majority of whom had been away from the settlement, and a small number who fled the White Night, survived.

With the exception of one Guyanese, all of the dead were American citizens. Most were family groups. The majority were black. Jonestown was a national movement. The birthplaces of the dead were in 39 states and 4 foreign countries. With the exception of one individual from Philadelphia, the last home of all the dead, before Jonestown, was in California with the largest group from the San Francisco Bay area (229), and almost

equal numbers from the site of the first Temple in Ukiah-Redwood Valley (139) and Los Angeles (137).

Since the events in Jonestown, I have searched through the academic journals for some serious study, but in vain. Neither in them, nor in the hundreds of papers on the program of the American Academy of Religion (which was in session during the event in 1978 and which meets each year about the time of its anniversary) has there been any mention. For the press, the event was all too quickly overshadowed by other new horrors. For the academy, it was as if Jonestown had never happened.

The press, by and large, featured the pornography of Jonestown—the initial focus on the daily revisions of the body count, the details on the condition of the corpses. Then, as more "background" information became available, space was taken over by lurid details of beatings, sexual humiliations, and public acts of perversion. The bulk of these focused on Jones as a "wrathful, lustful giant": his bisexuality, his mistresses, his all-night sermons on the "curse of his big penis," his questionnaires to adolescent members about their sexual fantasies concerning him, his arrest on a morals charge, his sexual demands on his congregants, including a secretary whose job it was to arrange liaisons for him with male and female members of his congregation, beginning with the formula, "Father hates to do this, but he has this tremendous urge." Everything was sensational. Almost no attempt was made to gain any interpretative framework. According to the journalists Maguire and Dunn, it was an event "so bizarre that historians would have to reach back into Biblical times[!] to find a calamity big enough for comparison."

It was not surprising, I suppose, considering the fact that a major metropolitan daily, the *New York Post*, found it impossible to mention the Ayotollah Khomeini's name without prefacing it by "that madman," that it was the language of fraud and insanity that dominated the accounts. There were several options: he began sincere and went mad; he began a fraud and went mad; he was always a fraud; he was always mad—or, sometimes impossibly, a combination of all of these. Thus *Newsweek* could, in one article, call Jones: "self-proclaimed messiah," "a man who played god," "full of hokum . . . and carnival stuff," "one who mesmerized," "fanatical," "a foul paranoid," "one vulnerable to forces in his own mind," "gifted with a strange power," "victim of darker forces," "a wrathful, lustful giant," "nightmarish," "bizarre." This is the usual language of religious polemics: read the Western biographies of Muhammad! There is neither anything new nor perceptive in this all-but-standard list. There is certainly nothing that will aid understanding. A few journalists of modest literary bent played on his name and made reference to "The Emperor Jones," but little light was shed by that.

More troubling, the newspapers gave a substantial amount of space to other religious leaders and their gyrations in distancing themselves from Jonestown. Perhaps the greatest single scandal in this regard occurred in the *New York Times*, one of whose longer analytical pieces on Jones was an article on the "Op-Ed" page entitled, "Billy Graham on Satan and Jonestown," in which the evangelist fulminated against "false prophets and messiahs," "satanically inspired people," and "the wholesale deception of false messiahs like Jim Jones," concluding:

One may speak of the Jones situation as that of a cult, but it would be a sad mistake to identify it in any way with Christianity. It is true that he came from a religious background but what he did and how he thought can have no relationship to the views and teachings of any legitimate form of historic Christianity. We have witnessed a false messiah who used the cloak of religion to cover a confused mind filled with a mixture of pseudo-religion, political ambition, sensual lust, financial dishonesty and, apparently, even murder. . . . Apparently Mr. Jones was a slave of a diabolical supernatural power from which he refused to be set free.⁷

This is to give way to the forces of unreason. I find Billy Graham's presence on the editorial pages of the *New York Times* a more stunning indication that the faith of the Enlightenment upon which the academy depends is in danger than the events in Jonestown!

The profession of religious studies, when it would talk, privately, within its boundaries, had a different perspective. For many, Jones's declarations that he was a Marxist, a communist, one who rejected the "opiate" of religion, were greeted with relief. He was not, after all, religious. Hence there was no professional obligation to interpret him. Never mind the fact that one of the most important religious phenomena of this century has been the combination of revolutionary Marxism and Roman Catholicism in Latin America, Marxism and Buddhism in southeast Asia, Marxism and Islam in the Middle East.

For others, it was not to be talked about because it revealed what had been concealed from public, academic discussion for a century—that religion has rarely been a positive, liberal force. Religion is not nice; it has been responsible for more death and suffering than any other human activity. Jonestown (and many of the other so-called cults) signaled the shallowness of the amalgamation between religion and liberalism which was, among other things, a major argument for the presence of religious studies in the state and secular universities. Religion was not civil. And so a new term had to be created, that of "cult," to segregate these uncivil phenomena from religion.

But civility is not to be reduced to "nice" behavior. A concomitant of the Enlightenment "domestication" of religion was the refusal to leave any human datum beyond the pale of reason and understanding. If the events of Jonestown are a behavioral *skandalon* to the Enlightenment faith, then the refusal of the academy to interpret Jonestown is, at least, an equivalent *skandalon* to the same faith.

It is remarkable to me that in all the literature on Jonestown that I have read the closest expression of the fundamental mood of the Enlightenment should have come in a sermon preached by a minister to the First United Methodist Church in Reno, Nevada—a minister who lost two daughters and a grandson in the White Night of Jonestown:

Jonestown people were human beings. Except for your caring relationship with us, Jonestown would be names, "cultists," "fanatics," "kooks." Our children are real to you, because you knew [us]. [My wife] and I could describe for you many of the dead. You would think that we were describing people whom you know, members of our church.⁸

This recognition of the ordinary humanness of the participants in Jonestown's White Night must certainly be the starting point of interpretation. For, "nothing human is foreign to me."

Our task is not to reach closure. Indeed, at present this is factually impossible, for we lack the majority of the necessary data. We know the pornography of Jonestown; we do not know its mythology, its ideology, its soteriology, its sociology—we do not know almost everything we would need to know in order to venture a secure argument. We know, for example, that Jones characteristically held all-night meetings at which he spoke for hours. We know almost nothing of what he said. But we do know enough, as a matter of principle, to refuse to accept prematurely the option of declaring that it is unintelligible and, hence, in some profound sense inhuman. In a situation like this, it is not irresponsible to guess, to imagine Jonestown, for the risk of a model, however tentative, will suggest the kinds of data we might require. And, as enough of the participants are still living and accessible, as enough documentation, including "hundreds of reel-to-reel tapes and cassettes," has been gathered by legal agencies that are incompetent to interpret them, we might hope, in time, to have the data that we need.⁹

How, then, shall we begin to think about Jonestown as students of religion, as members of the academy? How might we use the resources available for thinking about human religious activity within the context of the corporate endeavor of the human sciences? A basic strategy, one that is a prerequisite for intelligibility, is to remove from Jonestown the aspect of the unique, of its being utterly exotic. We must be able to declare

that Jonestown on 18 November 1978 was an instance of something known, of something we have seen before. We must perform an act of reduction. We must reduce Jonestown to the category of the known and the knowable.

In a primitive form, this initial move was made in the press which provided lists of suicides for religious and/or political reasons that have occurred in the past. From Masada, a first-century event which has become a foundation myth for the contemporary state of Israel (and which featured the same combination of isolation, homicide, and suicide) to the self-immolation of Buddhist monks and American pacifists during the Viet Nam War, we have seen it and heard about it before. Works such as Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* (1563)—one of the most popular books in the English language—supplied vivid portraits of those who would rather accept death, whether by their own hand or from another's, than renounce their religion. And works by J. Wisse (1933) and the psychiatrist Gregory Zilboorg (1939) supplied lengthy catalogs of corporate suicide among tribal peoples. Then, too, we have not lacked attempts to make such acts comprehensible, to make them less exotic. In studies by a distinguished series of scholars and writers, the act of self-destruction has been rescued from its legal and moral status as irrational. But none of these lists take us very far. Nor are they designed to. They do not allow us to propose an interpretation of Jonestown in its brute specificity. But they do allow us the beginning of reduction, that first glimpse of familiarity that is the prerequisite of intelligibility.

III

In this essay I would like to suggest two models, one quite old, one relatively new, which may illuminate aspects of the White Night of Jonestown. They are necessarily partial. They are far from being final proposals. But they are a beginning at an enterprise of looking at Jonestown rather than staring or looking away. We will have to continue this enterprise. We may, in the end, be frustrated. But not to have attempted an understanding, to allow the pornography of Jonestown to be all that can be thought, is, in a fundamental sense, to have surrendered the academy. It is to deny the possibility of there being human sciences.

The first model we might attempt is exceedingly old. It has been used in Western discourse about religion for close to 2500 years in order to interpret the uncivility of religion. It is a model for which the figure of Dionysus stands as a sign. Regardless of whether it is an adequate understanding of the complex historical development of the vast variety of Dionysiac cults (it is not), the Dionysiac *pattern*, as classically established by Euripides, elaborated by Livy and other Late Antique writers, rediscovered by Nietzsche and the early Rodhe, and, more recently, redis-

covered again by René Girard in *Violence and the Sacred* (1972), has proven compelling.

The utility of this model reminds us that the prime purpose of academic inquiry, most especially in the humanities, is to provide *exempli gratia*, an arsenal of classic instances which are held to be exemplary, to provide paradigmatic events and expressions as resources from which to reason, from which to extend the possibility of intelligibility to that which first appears novel. To have discussed Euripides' *Bacchae* is, to some degree, already to have discussed Jonestown.

The *Bacchae* is a complex play. More than many others, it resists univocal interpretation. Here, we are not engaged in studying the *Bacchae*. We are using, perhaps even misusing, Euripides' play for our own, quite particular, purpose. We are using this artifact from 407 B.C. in order to become more familiar with Jonestown.

The play immediately attracts our attention because it takes as one of its themes the introduction of a new religion, that of Dionysus. It focuses, as well, on forms of violence. Dionysus, as he is presented to us in the drama, is one who obliterates distinctions. He is "polymorphous," able to assume any form at will: god, man, beast, male, female, old, young. He abolishes, as well, distinctions among his devotees. They are presented to us as a nameless collective band. They represent a motley mixture of ethnic origins: barbarians, Greco-Asiatics, and Hellenes that have been melded together into a religion that strives for universality, one where no one is excluded, a religion for all mankind. The cult group in the play is exclusively women—although they can act as if they were men. Their chief mode of life is, from their viewpoint, "sober ecstasy." Hence the dualities. They are the "eaters of raw flesh," and they are "devoted to peace." They are the wild "dancers," and they are under strict discipline, being agents of "Justice, principle of order, spirit of custom."

The entrance of Dionysus and his band into a city is perceived, from the point of view of the city, as an invasion, as a contagious plague. It produces civil disorder and madness. Hence its official, civil interpretation will be that it is "alien," that it is founded by a "charlatan and a fraud," one who wishes to profit financially and seduce women. The civil response to such a cult, to its "impostures and unruliness," is expulsion or death. There is *no room* for this sort of religion within *civil space*.

Yet the Messengers give us another, quite different, portrait of the Dionysiac band. Within *their own space*, apart from the city, on a mountain, they live in a paradise of their own making. Here they contravene the civic portrait. They are not "drunk with wine or wandering," but "modest and sober"; Pentheus will see to his "surprise how chaste the Bacchae are." On both occasions when they are spied on by representatives of the city, we see the Bacchae inhabiting *utopian space*, living

in gentle, free spontaneity. In each case a Messenger carries this report *back* to the city, a report of the positive aspects of the obliteration of distinctions: not madness, but freedom.

The first Messenger's report is of a sacred and miraculous "peaceable kingdom," where the women tame and suckle wild beasts, where rivers of water, wine, and milk burst forth from the earth, where honey spurts from the wands the women carry. "If you had been there and seen these wonders for yourself, you would have gone down on your knees and prayed to the god you now deny." The second Messenger's report is of domestic peace. "We saw the Maenads sitting, their hands busily moving at their happy tasks."

But the Messengers represent something else. They are not only reporters of Bacchic ethnography, bearing reports on the utopian civil life of the Bacchics within their own space, they are, as well, *invaders* of that space. They are "spies" and intruders. As the Bacchics disorder the city when they "invade," so too the figures from the city disorder paradise when they spy on it and intrude on it. The response in both cases is the same. The Bacchics are instantly transformed into wild figures of violence. The motif of the obliteration of distinctions continues, but now in a way that elicits civil disgust and fear rather than envy and reverence. In the first case, the women tear live, domesticated animals apart with their bare hands. More seriously, they attack civic space. "Like invaders," they swooped down on the border villages, "everything in sight they pillaged and destroyed. They snatched children from their homes"—and they did this with supernatural power, without conventional weapons. When the men of the village fought back, the women routed them with their wands, while the weapons of the men were unable to draw blood. In the second instance, it is a man who is pulled apart by the women's bare hands, a mother who slays her son.¹⁰

Moving several centuries in time, we find a modulation of the Bacchic paradigm. When, in 186 B.C., the Roman Senate suppressed the Bacchic cults, all of the older elements of religious propaganda were reaffirmed. It was an "invasion" and an "epidemic." It was foreign, fraudulent, characterized by violence and sexual excesses. But the speech that Livy puts in the mouth of the consul Postumius reveals another dimension of our theme. There is no longer a dichotomy between civil space and Bacchic utopian space, the cult now dwells within the city. It lives in *subversive space* where "some believe it to be a kind of worship of the gods; others suppose it a permitted sport and relaxation." Civil understanding has domesticated the Dionysiac cult, and this makes it all the more dangerous. The external utopian space of the Bacchae has become internal, subversive space within the city. The Bacchae now live in a *counterpolis*. In his speech from the Rostra, Postumius declaims:

Unless you are on your guard, Citizens of Rome, this present meeting, held in the daylight, legally summoned by a consul, can be paralleled by another meeting held at night. Now, as individuals, they [the Bacchics] are afraid of you, as you stand assembled in a united body; but presently, when you have scattered to your houses in the city or to your homes in the country, *they* will have assembled and will be making plans for their own safety and at the same time for your destruction; and then you as individuals will have to fear them as a united body.¹¹

But, since the Bacchics are within civil space, they may be dealt with by civil means: trials, executions, banishments, and laws for their suppression.

I suggest no simple parallels. There are profound differences between Dionysiac cults and Peoples Temple Christian Church. Yet the spatial considerations that I have advanced from the one, supply some instances of familiarity when we seek to understand the other.

The fundamental fact about Jones is that he sought to overcome distinctions. At times he termed this impulse, Christianity, at times, socialism or communism, but the effort was the same. While one can point to bisexuality and other forms of liberation and libertinism that bear some resemblance to Dionysiac praxis, these parallels are superficial. The major distinction that Jones labored to overcome was a distinctly modern and American one: it was the distinction of race. This was the consistent theme as he moved from established civil and religious space (the Somerset Southside Church, the Laurel Street Tabernacle, the Human Rights Commission, the Housing Authority) to a space of his own making. In one of the earliest official reports on Peoples Temple by the district superintendent of the United Methodist Church for Oakland and the East Bay, it is described as "a caring community of people of all races and classes. They bear the mark of compassion and justice—compassion for the hungry and jobless, lonely and disturbed, and also for the earth and her offspring."¹² In some sense, the predominance of Blacks in Peoples Temple is equivalent to the predominance of women in the Dionysiac religions.

Prior to Jonestown, Peoples Temple might be described as inhabiting subversive space. It participated in civil activities and won major forms of public recognition for these efforts. But, hidden from public view, it was also a parallel mode of government. Internally, it was a counterpolis. It had its own modes of leadership, its own criteria for citizenship, its own mores and laws, its own system of discipline and punishment. When this was revealed to the public, civil world by disaffected members (as was the Dionysian cult in Rome), the reaction could have been predicted from Livy. An exposé of its founder in terms of fraud and of the Temple in terms of a subversive danger to the community brought legal and leg-

islative remedies to bear: official investigations, lawsuits, criminal charges. Seen in this light, the article in *New West Magazine* is parallel to the speech of Postumius.

Jones's reaction was one of exodus to utopian space, to Guyana. As one reads through the various reports on Jonestown prior to November 1978, the equivalents of the speeches of the Messengers in the *Bacchae*, both those from visitors and those produced by Peoples Temple, there is little doubt that one is reading the language and rhetoric of paradise. One such report, from the summer of 1978, begins by quoting Matthew 25:35-40:

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me. . . . Truly I say to you, as you did to one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me.

and continues:

What a miracle it is! Over eight hundred acres of jungle have been cleared since 1974, most of it within the last year. . . . What we found at the cooperative was a loving community in the true New Testament sense. . . . Jonestown offers a rare opportunity for deep relationships between men and women, young and old, who come from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds.¹³

A pamphlet put out by the Temple to extol Jonestown was entitled, "A Feeling of Freedom," and Jones elaborated:

We enjoy every type of organized sport and recreational games. Musical talents and arts are flourishing. We share every joy and every need. Our lives are secure and rich with variety and growth and expanding knowledge. . . . Now there is peace . . . there is freedom from the loneliness and the agony of racism. . . . We have found security and freedom in collectivism and we can help build a peaceful agricultural nation.¹⁴

There is little doubt that whatever the "reality," this evaluation *was* shared by the majority of the citizens of Jonestown. It was, to use the title of the Peoples Temple home for retarded children back in Redwood Valley, truly "Happy Acres."

Into this utopian space, figures from the city came to invade and to spy. Congressman Ryan and the press disordered paradise and the result could have been predicted from the *Bacchae*—the rapid shift from peace to terror and the furious murder of the intruders. In the *Bacchae*, the Maenads, after routing the invaders, go on to attack the border villages. At Jonestown, the violence was directed inwards, the White Night, the total destruction of themselves. In part, this was a measure of realism. There

was no possible military solution for Jonestown against those they perceived as the aggressors. The Temple lacked the Maenads' supernatural weapons. But, in part, this was as well a spatial reaction. Utopia had been invaded, and it was time for another exodus.

On 15 March 1979, the *New York Times* published the transcript of a tape recording of Jones, during the White Night, exhorting his followers to suicide. It is a remarkable document.¹⁵ Jones clearly interprets the visit of Ryan as an "invasion": they "came after our children." Following the shooting at the airport, more powerful military invaders will return; they will annihilate the community. There is "no hiding place down here." No further terrestrial exodus will serve, there is no utopia, no "nowhere" where they will not be sought out. The tape reiterates: "It's too late for Russia." "There's no plane." So "Let's get gone. Let's get gone. Let's get gone."

The language for death used by Jones and other voices on the tape is consistently spatial—indeed, it suggests a communal rhetoric. "Step over," "step to that other side," "stepping over to another place," "stepping over to another plane," "you have to step across . . . this world was not our home," "if you knew what's ahead of you, you'd be glad to be stepping over." But this language suggests as well the sort of additional data that we need. What was their view of afterlife? Of the "other" world? On the tape there is only a twice-repeated reference to "the green scene thing." But this reference is sufficient to establish a post mortem paradisiacal context, in a place where they will not be followed, where they would not be further intruded upon.

By reading Jonestown in light of the *Bacchae* and Euripides in light of Jonestown, we can begin to understand its utopian logic. We can begin to find Jonestown familiar. Its failure to secure subversive space was predictable, as was a violent conflict when representatives from civil space invaded utopia. By this interpretation, the most proximate responsibility for the events of White Night was Ryan's.

IV

Let me go on to suggest a second option, a second partial interpretation, a second act of making Jonestown familiar.

As I read the various, early press reports of the White Night, my eye was caught by one detail. Not only 914 human deaths, but also all the animals. In the words of the first reporter on the scene:

I noticed that many of them had died with their arms around each other, men and women, white and black, young and old. Little babies lying on the ground too. Near their mothers and fathers. Dead. Finally, I turned back toward the main pavilion and noticed the dogs that lay dead on the sidewalk. The dogs, I thought. What had they done? Then

I realized that Jones had meant to leave nothing, not even animals, to bear witness to the final horror. There were to be no survivors. Even the dogs and Mr. Muggs, Jonestown's pet chimpanzee, had their place in the long white night into which the Peoples Temple had been ordered by the mad Mr. Jones. The heat and stench were overpowering. There was nothing to drink because Jones had ordered the community water supply contaminated with poison.¹⁶

Leaving aside Krause's lurid prose and his editorializing, the destruction was intended to be total: men, women, children, animals, fish, and water supply—and this destruction alongside a deliberate presentation of utopian harmony—bodies lying together, “arms around each other,” uniting the sexes, age groups, and races.

This, too, has a certain familiarity to the student of religion. Although it is a recent model, rather than an old one that will be called on, the model of the cargo cult. Let me give one specific example from Espiritu Santo in the New Hebrides.¹⁷

In 1923, a native prophet, Ronovuro, announced that the ancestral dead would return to the island, after a flood, on a ship bearing rice and other foods. This would be distributed to members of his cult if they were fully paid up. (He charged fees for entrance, ranging from 5 shillings to one pound). A stone storehouse was built to hold the cargo. However, Ronovuro prophesied, the Europeans would attempt to prevent the ship from landing and distributing its gifts. Therefore, the natives must rebel. While, eventually, all Whites must be killed, for now, one European was to be singled out. He would serve as a surrogate for the others. In July 1923, a British planter named Clapcott was murdered by Ronovuro's followers. He was shot, and his body was mutilated. According to some reports, parts of it were eaten. The cult was suppressed by military means. Six of the leaders were condemned to death, others were sentenced to prison terms. In 1937, the cult was revived, but was quickly suppressed by the authorities.

In 1944, a new prophet, Tsek, arose and founded the Ronovuro school. It was likewise a cargo cult, but of a somewhat different form. His message, according to J. G. Miller, was:

Destroy everything which you got from the Whites also all [native made] mats and basket-making tools. Burn your houses and build two large dormitories in each village: one for the men and the other for the women. . . . Stop working for the Whites. Slaughter all domestic animals: pigs, dogs, cats, etc.

New social forms were developed. The members of the cult went nude, they spoke a common language although the villages from which they came had originally belonged to different linguistic groups. Tribal friction

and quarreling were eliminated in favor of cultic solidarity. A road several miles long, the result of enormous collective labor, was built to the sea, terminating at the site of Clapcott's murder, where the cargo ship would land and discharge the goods.

Again the cult was suppressed, although there are indications that it still continues in modulated forms. Ecstatic speech and healings have been added, and there is a secret room with vines stretched between poles that serves as “wireless belong boy,” a place to wait for news of the arrival of the cargo ship.

There are many striking parallels of detail between these cults and Jonestown. But there is so much that is specifically Oceanic in cargo cults that a pursuit of these would be dangerous. Yet there is much, in the general ideology, that is suggestive. In the preceding chapter, I tried to summarize the underlying logic. It need not be rehearsed here. It is sufficient to recall that the central, moral idea was one of achieving exchange reciprocity between the Whites and the natives. A variety of stratagems were employed, the most desperate, such as on Santos, involving a total destruction of everything the natives own as if, by this dramatic gesture, to awaken the White man's sense of obligation to exchange, in order to shame him into a recognition of his responsibilities. “We have now given everything away. What will you give in return?”¹⁸

I am not suggesting simple parallels. Peoples Temple was not a cargo cult although, if we sought to interpret the religion of Peoples Temple rather than its end, we would be helped immeasurably if we understood it in the context of messianic, nativistic, cargo cults. But Ronovuro and Tsek can help us become familiar with Jones at the moment of the White Night. (Perhaps they could help us become even more familiar with him if we knew more about his religious and political ideologies). Indeed, Jones himself draws a parallel between White Night and native crisis cults. On the transcript, someone protests, and Jones answers:

It's never been done before you say. It's been done by every tribe in history. Every tribe facing annihilation. All the Indians of the Amazon are doing it right now. . . . Because they do not want to live in this kind of a world.

Alongside the spatial language for death on the last tape from Jonestown, there is another language, the language of “revolutionary suicide” (a term borrowed from the writings of Huey P. Newton). “We are not committing suicide, it's a revolutionary act.” “What I'm talking about is the dispensation of judgment, this is a revolutionary—a revolutionary suicide council. I'm not talking about self-destruction.” “[Let's] lay down our lives to protest.” “We didn't commit suicide. We committed an act of revolutionary suicide protesting the conditions of an inhumane world.”

And finally, "I'm sure that they'll—they'll pay for it. This is a revolutionary suicide. This is not a self-destructive suicide. So they'll pay for this. They brought this upon us. And they'll pay for that. I leave that destiny to them." Who are these anonymous figures who will "pay"? Who are "they"? The cargo model suggests Whites.

On the tape, although Jones does refer to the congressman and other external enemies, his primary hostility seems to be directed clearly against defecting members of Peoples Temple, both those who have defected in the past and, more immediately, the small group who left for the airport with Ryan a little more than an hour before.

That we lay down our lives in protest against what's been done. That we lay down our lives to protest what's being done. The criminality of people. The cruelty of people. Who walked out of here today? Do you know who walked out? Mostly white people. [Voices] Mostly white people.

And, more eloquently, an unidentified woman's voice:

It broke my heart completely. All of this year the white people had been with us and they're not a part of us [now]. So we might as well end it now, because I don't see. . . . [Music and voices]

Jones and Peoples Temple had labored mightily, at extraordinary cost, to achieve their vision of racial equality. And they had failed. They had failed earlier, even in their internal organization—the leadership group was entirely white. And they failed, most immediately, in the defections. What was left was a gesture—a gesture designed to elicit shame, a gesture that the mixed rhetoric of Jonestown termed a "revolutionary suicide." By destroying all, by giving their all, they sought to call forth a reciprocal action. They would show the world, but most particularly, the defectors. In death, they would achieve a corporate picture of peace and harmony—the picture indelibly recorded by Krause and the news photographers.

They failed, as the cargo cults failed; but we may catch a glimpse of the logic of their deed, aided by familiarity gained from Oceania.

I have by no means supplied a final answer to Jonestown's awesome final solution. But this preliminary attempt has kept faith with the responsibilities attendant on being a member of the academy. It is now for others to continue the task, with Jonestown, or wherever the question of understanding human activities and expression is raised. For if we do not persist in the quest for intelligibility, there can be no human sciences, let alone, any place for the study of religion within them.