

Perspective

Godwin's Law and Jones' Corollary

The Problem of Using Extremes to Make Predictions

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ABSTRACT: Peoples Temple has been seen as the paradigmatic cult exemplifying the horrors of manipulative leaders and brainwashed followers due to the deaths in Jonestown on 18 November 1978. This article argues against the utility of making comparisons to such an extreme event, however. Drawing upon Godwin's Law and its observation that online debates eventually raise the trope of Hitler and Nazis, the article introduces Jones' Corollary: Discussions of new religions inevitably begin with a comparison to Jonestown. Making generalizations about new religions by starting with Jonestown is inappropriate because of the unique nature of Peoples Temple and its extraordinary ending in Jonestown. Nevertheless, Jonestown functions for the anticult movement and in online exchanges the same way that references to Nazis and Hitler do—to evoke shock, disgust, and outrage, and, ultimately, to terminate analysis.

KEYWORDS: Jonestown, Godwin's Law, religious freedom, religious persecution

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In today's climate of hyperbole, differentiating between the normative and the extreme seems almost impossible. Extreme compared to what? Normative for whom?¹ These questions are crucial in contemporary discussions of new religious movements in the United States and abroad. The Russian Federation regime's claim that Jehovah's Witnesses are "unpatriotic" and the Chinese government's assertion that Falun Gong and other non-mainstream groups are "evil cults" clearly demonstrate that ideas of cultural normativity and deviance are used to justify state suppression of alternative religions. Reliance on exaggerated claims has become government policy in some countries.

We already see this same tendency toward overstatement in online discussions about almost any topic. One byproduct of most internet debates, articulated as Godwin's Law, states that "[a]s an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison to Nazis or Hitler approaches one."² Raising the specter of Hitler, Nazis, and gas chambers stifles analysis rather than enhances it because everything is measured by a standard that most people consider extreme, the Holocaust. Yet we must ask the following questions: Is the Holocaust an absolutely unique event, incomparable to anything else? Or is it just a matter of degree that makes it different?³ Under Godwin's Law, it is the extreme nature of the Nazis and the Holocaust—that is, the degree—that makes them useless as points of comparison most of the time, although even Mike Godwin, creator of the "law," admits to exceptions that are thoughtful and well-grounded in historical understanding.⁴

How, then, do we determine what might be truly outrageous? Legal precedents may be useful illustrations. For example, prohibitions against torture adopted by international bodies have created a "legal archetype" that forbids torture under any circumstances.⁵ In a paradoxical fashion, an anticanon of wrongly-decided cases exists in the United States that outlines exactly what we as a society have come to reject. (I am using the concept of anticanon as Columbia University law professor Jamal Greene defines it in his assessment of anomalous Supreme Court decisions, such as *Dred Scott v. Sandford* or *Plessy v. Ferguson*.⁶) There are both positive and negative legal precedents that we may draw upon for making decisions.

But when we turn to historical, rather than legal, cases, we find that the use of uncommon incidents tends to generate false equivalencies and lead to erroneous conclusions. As one international relations expert observes, "[O]ne cannot easily draw conclusions for ordinary cases from extraordinary ones."⁷ Yet that is exactly what anticult activists did following the mass murders and suicides in Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978. Peoples Temple became the archetypal evil cult and Jonestown the necessary telos of all cultic activity in subsequent anticult studies and promotional materials. The dramatic ending of the group legitimized

anticult warnings about cults and silenced those who argued for a more complex understanding of new religions.⁸ Thanks to pressure from “cult-busters” in 1993, the FBI treated the Branch Davidians as though they were planning “another Jonestown.”⁹ After the 9/11 attacks of 2001, anticult professionals made links between new religions and terrorism.¹⁰ In 2005, cult expert Rick Ross compared Warren Jeffs, the leader of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, to Jim Jones, the leader of Peoples Temple.¹¹ In 2010, yet another cult expert suggested the possibility of another Jonestown in regard to the fate of the Unification Church after the death of its founder, Sun Myung Moon.¹² And in late 2017, the *New York Times* compared ISIS to Jonestown in its online “Retro Report.”¹³

I would therefore like to introduce Jones' Corollary to Godwin's Law, which states that: Discussions of new religions inevitably begin with a comparison to Jonestown. While Godwin's Law denotes the termination of a discussion thread, Jones' Corollary reaches the conclusion before dialogue has even begun. It is not just that analyses of marginalized or minority religions eventually invoke the threat of cult violence, or even “Another Jonestown.” Rather, Jonestown and its leader Jim Jones are both the starting and ending points in a single stroke. In his important essay on Jonestown, Jonathan Z. Smith concluded that “[w]e must reduce Jonestown to the category of the known and the knowable,” by which he meant that scholars should move the event from the exotic and the unique into the familiar and understandable.¹⁴ Jones' Corollary, in contrast, reduces the known and the knowable all to Jonestown, without regard to distinction.

The greatest danger of appealing to Jones' Corollary is that it justifies state nullification of religious freedom. Legal discrimination by governments, as well as persecution of religious minorities by non-state actors, has intensified dramatically in recent decades. Indeed, the presumption of violence has both inspired and excused the escalation of government raids on religious communities, as documented by Stuart Wright and Susan Palmer.¹⁵

Exaggerated historical comparisons are employed in an effort to curtail nontraditional religious practices. False analogies promulgated by interested parties—such as anticult professionals, relatives, former members, and the news media—encourage and even demand that government agencies act in order to protect the public interest against what are perceived to be dangerous religions. Popular prejudices may even influence the scholarly treatment of nontraditional religions.¹⁶

This article first describes the problem of using radical examples to conduct analyses or make predictions. It then turns to specific instances of the ways in which the anticult movement has utilized the threat of violence—especially the code word “Jonestown”—to mobilize law enforcement action against new and marginal religions. I will explain why

making such comparisons to Peoples Temple is not only inflammatory but inaccurate, given the unique nature of the events in Jonestown. I conclude by discussing what we might learn from Jonestown and Jones' Corollary as they apply to public policy regarding new religious movements.

There are several problems with relying on extreme cases to make policy. The most obvious and egregious example of this is the "ticking bomb" justification for torture. In a nutshell, it asks the ethical question, Would you torture someone if you could thereby save hundreds of lives? While one might agree to this proposition in theory, the possibility of this precise scenario occurring is so rare as to be practically nonexistent. As law professor David Luban notes, the ticking bomb situation "is proffered against liberals who believe in an absolute prohibition against torture." Once someone agrees to an exception, "she's down in the mud" with proponents of torture. "The only question left is how much further down she will go."¹⁷

Another exceptional, yet painfully familiar, case is that of medically-induced abortion. At what point is it unacceptable? At one extreme are those who oppose all forms of preventing impregnation, including artificial methods of contraception. Close to that group are those who state that life begins at conception. Using a slippery slope argument, they suggest that any attempts to terminate pregnancies will ultimately lead to infanticide. In an example of Godwin's Law, they compare abortion providers in the United States with Nazi doctors who forced women to have abortions or to be sterilized. At the other extreme are proponents of late-term abortions, or even parents who decline surgical intervention that might save the life of a seriously ill newborn. Congressional arguments over late-term abortions ignore the fact that these particular abortions are rare and usually concern the health of the mother or the viability of the child. The key word in all of these cases is "extreme."

Raising the specter of Jonestown to characterize a new or minority religion functions the same way as do the ticking bomb or the abortion models. It presents the extreme as the norm. As background, in 1978 more than 900 men, women, and children perished in a mass murder-suicide ritual in the South American country of Guyana. They were members of a religious group called Peoples Temple, and the deaths occurred in their agricultural project named Jonestown, after their leader Jim Jones. While it is clear that more than 300 children under the age of 18 were murdered, it is less clear as to whether the remaining residents voluntarily ingested a mixture of poison and tranquilizers or were forced to do so.

Anticultists had been warning parents about the dangers of cult membership throughout the 1970s, although Peoples Temple never appeared in the anticult literature before 18 November 1978.¹⁸ It had little in common with the Children of God, the Unification Church, or Hare Krishnas—the cult bogeymen of that era. Nevertheless, the anticult

movement welcomed Jonestown as the fulfillment of its dire predictions. And thus Jones' Corollary was born: Discussions of new religions inevitably begin with a comparison to Jonestown. It was probably unavoidable, for, as Eileen Barker observed, the Temple's dreadful end meant that "no new religion would be regarded in quite the same light or treated in quite the same way after Jonestown."¹⁹

It did not take long for anticultists to capitalize on the tragedy. Ron Enroth opened his 1979 book *The Lure of Cults* by writing that, "The unprecedented media exposure given Jonestown has alerted Americans to the fact that seemingly beneficent religious groups can mask a hellish rot." He added that the information that emerged about Peoples Temple "corroborated the findings and conclusions about cultic groups published earlier."²⁰ Enroth's 1983 *Guide to Cults and Other New Religions* dismissed the scholarly language used by academics to avoid the bias inherent in the word "cult," before adding that "its negative connotations are inescapable, especially since Jonestown. No one wants to be identified as a member of a cult."²¹ I would suggest that no one wants to be identified with Jonestown either. The very first page of Willa Appel's 1983 book *Cults in America* states, "Few people appeared to take cults very seriously until November 1978, when nine hundred Americans died in Jonestown, Guyana."²² Other anticult specialists opened their books and articles with passing references to Jonestown, suggesting implicitly or declaring explicitly that all new religions had this lethal possibility.²³ The psychiatrist Louis Jolyon West summarized the consensus when he wrote that "most [cults]—if not all—have the potentiality of becoming deadly, as the [Peoples] Temple of Jim Jones did."²⁴ In these essentialist analyses, the deaths in Jonestown demonstrate that violence is inherent in all new religions, regardless of membership, ideology, environment, or other factors.

In the wake of the Jonestown tragedy, the anticult movement received a forum for shaping public opinion about new religions. This had tragic consequences in 1993 when inappropriate comparisons with Peoples Temple members at Jonestown led officials from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms and the FBI to misread the Branch Davidians at Mount Carmel outside Waco, Texas. The significant part played by oppositional forces—apostates, the news media, and anticult groups—in defining both David Koresh and the Branch Davidians shaped law enforcement officials' perception of them and their responses toward the Branch Davidians.²⁵ Opponents used the threat of mass suicide as a theme symbolizing the menace of all cults. According to sociologist of religion John R. Hall, they constructed a "genetic bridge" between Jonestown and the Branch Davidians, in which two unrelated groups became connected through oppositional rhetoric.²⁶

Scholars in the anticult movement juxtaposed Waco and Jonestown as more or less similar events that demonstrated the ongoing hazards of

unscrupulous leaders exerting mind control. “For me,” wrote renowned cult expert Margaret Singer, “Waco was a replay of Jonestown.”²⁷ The psychiatrist Marc Galanter assumed that the Branch Davidians planned to commit mass suicide and asked how they came to make that decision. He answered his own question by attributing the deaths to the manipulations of David Koresh, who, like Jim Jones, wanted to maintain “absolute control” of his flock.²⁸

Jonestown and Jim Jones continue to be utilized as shorthand for dangerous groups and deranged leaders. Similarities between Jim Jones and Donald Trump have been noted, with one author remarking on their narcissism, hierarchical power arrangements, and self-serving manipulation of information.²⁹ In June 2017, the TED-ED project—an education initiative produced by the folks who bring you TED talks—uploaded a YouTube video titled “Why do people join cults?”³⁰ The animated video begins with a caricature of Jim Jones holding a Bible, and by the end of the very first minute, arrives at the deaths in Jonestown. By the end of the second minute, we have traveled all the way to the suicides at Heaven’s Gate.

The problem with using “Jonestown” to signify the evils of cults is that Peoples Temple was unlike any of the groups that anticultists feared in the 1970s, and it remains unprecedented even today. To return to the distinction made at the outset regarding the Holocaust, Peoples Temple differed in both degree and in kind. It diverged in degree in that large numbers of people actually died in this cult. Its terrible denouement is shared by only a handful of other groups, including: the Order of the Solar Temple in Switzerland, France, and Canada; Aum Shinrikyo in Japan; and the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God in Uganda. Insiders—and some outsiders in the case of Aum Shinrikyo—were murdered or committed suicide. (For a number of reasons, I don’t equate the deaths of the Branch Davidians or the Heaven’s Gate members with Jonestown, nor do I include them in the following calculations.³¹) All told, fewer than 2,000 deaths can be attributed to these groups, something less than the number of fatalities in the 11 September 2001 attacks. When we consider that these four outbursts of cult violence took place over the course of forty years, we must conclude that they are the exception rather than the rule.

Peoples Temple also differed in kind from other groups in terms of its membership, its ideology, its social geography, and its acute isolation. Unlike the new religious movements that attracted young educated whites in the 1970s, Peoples Temple appealed to working class whites and African Americans. The majority of its thousands of members in San Francisco were African American, as were the majority of those who died in Jonestown.³² Far from being foreign or exotic, the Temple began as a Pentecostal-style church—complete with speaking in tongues—with

a Social Gospel message. Its ideology of apostolic socialism was unusual, however. Rather than having other-worldly goals, the group and its leaders blended liberal Protestantism with a humanistic approach to social problems. They were very much in and part of the world. The geography in which the movement existed also changed throughout its twenty-five-year history: from the highly segregated Midwest in the 1950s, to the progressive liberalism of the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1960s and early 1970s, to the ultimate socialist paradise, namely the Cooperative Republic of Guyana, in the mid-1970s.

This last move took the group into the dense jungle interior, close to Guyana's border with Venezuela, and created the biggest difference between Peoples Temple and all other new religions: namely, severe isolation. More than 200 kilometers from any city and separated from its nearest neighbors by almost impassable forests, Jonestown's inaccessibility created conditions for abuse that could go unchecked.³³ There is nothing analogous with any other new religion—violent or nonviolent—to these circumstances.

But if Jonestown was an absolutely unique event, what can we learn from it? There are, in fact, several lessons that relate to Jones' Corollary and the popular practice of demonizing minority religions. Linking Jonestown to a particular religious group constructs a frame, or filter, by which people can instantly determine the relative danger, or lack of danger, that group represents. Organizational theorist Erving Goffman's frame theory helps scholars explain how sets of beliefs and meanings develop within society.³⁴ "An implicit function of framing is assigning causality or blame for a condition or event."³⁵ Just as Godwin's Law foretells how a debate will end, Jones' Corollary anticipates the negative framing of a religion. This particularly applies to new and minority religious groups that may exist in tension with the wider society.

It is important to point out that Jones' Corollary may well be a phenomenon limited to the West. The Russian government did not refer to Peoples Temple or Jonestown when it banned the Jehovah's Witnesses in 2017. Nor did the Chinese government when it suppressed Uighur Muslims or Tibetan Buddhists. It revived the term *xie jiao*, which has been translated as "evil cult,"³⁶ to portray the *qigong* group Falun Gong, which it has persecuted.³⁷ Nevertheless, officials in Russia, China, France, and elsewhere have framed unpopular or minority religions within the "dangerous cult" paradigm, citing their lack of patriotism and the peril they pose to society and to the family.³⁸ A variation of Jones' Corollary is still at work in these cases: That is, discussions of new or minority religions generally begin by noting how dangerous they are.

We should be alert to the symbolic language employed by the media and by policy makers. Jonestown is one type of code; Hitler is another. Neither is helpful for illuminating actual dangers. Thus, Godwin's Law and Jones' Corollary are instructive for examining contemporary

debates about new religious movements because they expose the exaggerations and falsehoods made about unpopular religions.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Eugene V. Gallagher explores this conundrum of comparison in "Compared to What? 'Cults' and 'New Religious Movements'," *History of Religions* 47, nos. 2/3 (2007/2008): 205–20.

² Mike Godwin, "Godwin's Law," 12 January 1995, https://w2.eff.org/Net_culture/Folklore/Humor/godwins.law, accessed 30 August 2017 [defunct].

³ Answering "yes" to the first question is Steven T. Katz, *The Holocaust in Historical Context*, Vol. 1: *The Holocaust and Mass Death before the Modern Age* (New York: Oxford, 1994). Answering "yes" to the second is Berel Lang, Review of *The Holocaust in Historical Context*, *History and Theory* 35, no. 3 (1996): 375–384.

⁴ Mike Godwin, "Sure, Call Trump a Nazi. Just Make Sure That You Know What You're Talking About," *Washington Post*, 14 December 2015, <http://www.rstreet.org/op-ed/sure-call-trump-a-nazi-just-make-sure-you-know-what-youre-talking-about/>.

⁵ Jeremy Waldron, "Torture and Positive Law: Jurisprudence for the White House," *Columbia Law Review* 105, no. 6 (2005): 1681–1750.

⁶ Jamal Greene, "The Anticanon," *Harvard Law Review* 125, no. 2 (2011): 379–475.

⁷ Henry Shue, "Torture," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 7, no. 2 (Winter 1978): 141.

⁸ James T. Richardson, "Peoples Temple and Jonestown: A Corrective Comparison and Critique," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 19, no. 3 (1980): 239–255.

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¹⁰ Stuart A. Wright, "Reframing Religious Violence after 9/11: Analysis of the ACM Campaign to Exploit the Threat of Terrorism," *Nova Religio* 12, no. 4 (2009): 5–27.

¹¹ Stuart A. Wright and Susan J. Palmer, *Storming Zion: Government Raids on Religious Communities* (New York: Oxford, 2016), 118.

¹² Steven Hassan, "Why the Reported Sale of the Moonies Washington Times for a reported \$1 Requires Greater Scrutiny!" *Huffington Post*, 7 September 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/steven-hassan/why-the-reported-sale-of_b_707744.html.

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- ¹⁴ Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Devil in Mr. Jones," in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 112.
- ¹⁵ Wright and Palmer, *Storming Zion*.
- ¹⁶ According to sociologist David Feltmate, "people in social mainstreams have treated [new religions] as dangerous and problematic groups." David Feltmate, "Perspective: Rethinking New Religious Movements Beyond a Social Problems Paradigm," *Nova Religio* 20, no. 2 (2016): 84.
- ¹⁷ David Luban, "Liberalism, Torture, and the Ticking Bomb," in *The Torture Debate in America*, ed. Karen J. Greenberg (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 39–83.
- ¹⁸ Eileen Barker, "Religious Movements: Cult and Anticult Since Jonestown," *Annual Review of Sociology* 12 (1986): 329–46.
- ¹⁹ Barker, "Religious Movements," 330.
- ²⁰ Ronald Enroth, *The Lure of the Cults* (Chappaqua, NY: Christian Herald Books, 1979), 13, 15–16.
- ²¹ Ronald Enroth, "What is a Cult?" in *A Guide to Cults and New Religions*, ed. Ronald Enroth (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 11.
- ²² Willa Appel, *Cults in America: Programmed for Paradise* (New York: Henry Holt, 1983), 1.
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- ²⁴ Louis Jolyon West, "Persuasive Techniques in Contemporary Cults: A Public Health Approach," *Cultic Studies Review* 4, no. 2 (1990): 20.
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- ²⁶ Hall, "Public Narratives and the Apocalyptic Sect," 232.
- ²⁷ Margaret Singer with Janja Lalich, *Cults in our Midst*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003 [1995]), 28.
- ²⁸ Marc Galanter, *Cults: Faith, Healing, and Coercion*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 170.
- ²⁹ Archie Smith Jr., "Jim Jones and Donald Trump: Is There a Parallel?" *The Jonestown Report* 18 (November 2016), http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=67677. See also Joe Ramm, "'Flawed Individuals will Victimize You:' a top FBI Profiler's Lessons on Extreme Narcissists like Trump," *Salon*, 10 December 2016, http://www.salon.com/2016/12/10/an-fbi-profiler-explains-trumps-narcissism_partner/.

³⁰ Janja Lalich, “Why Do People Join Cults?” TED-ED, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kB-dJaCXAxA>, published 12 June 2017.

³¹ In the case of the Branch Davidians, it is clear that members were assaulted and believed they had to defend themselves in what became their last stand. They did not inaugurate the violence, but responded to it. The class of Heaven’s Gate did not harm anyone but themselves. Therefore, these two instances do not seem to fit the other cases.

³² For a complete breakdown on gender, race, and age of those who died see, Rebecca Moore, “An Update on the Demographics of Jonestown,” *the jonestown report* 19 (November 2017), at https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=70495.

³³ See the “Accusation of Human Rights Violations” prepared by the Concerned Relatives in April 1978, which includes the “Accusation” and supporting documents describing abuses in Jonestown, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=13080, accessed 2 April 2018. An affidavit sworn by Deborah Layton in June 1978 also details problems in the community, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=13072, last modified 3 January 2017. For a scholarly assessment see Rebecca Moore, “Narratives of Persecution, Suffering, and Martyrdom: Violence in Peoples Temple and Jonestown,” in *Violence and New Religious Movements*, ed. James R. Lewis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 95–111.

³⁴ Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1974).

³⁵ Wright, “Reframing Religious Violence after 9/11,” 9.

³⁶ The translation of *xie jiao* is contested. Massimo Introvigne, “Persecuting the Church of Almighty God as a Xie Jiao in China,” *Religious Freedom and Human Rights*, International Conference in Seoul, Korea, 23 October 2017, <https://www.rphrr.org/persecuting-the-church-of-almighty-god-as-a-xie-jiao-in-china.html>.

³⁷ In addition to the arrest, torture, and execution of thousands of Falun Gong members, the Chinese government is harvesting organs from prisoners, who are killed during the surgical procedure. David Matas and David Kilgour, “Report into Allegations of Organ Harvesting of Falun Gong Practitioners in China,” <https://cja.org/downloads/Kilgour-Matas-organ-harvesting-rpt-July6-eng.pdf>, accessed 2 April 2018. See also James W. Tong, *Revenge of the Forbidden City: The Suppression of the Falungong in China 1999–2005* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³⁸ Wright and Palmer document dozens of government raids on new religions around the globe in *Storming Zion*.