

People's Temple and Jonestown: A Corrective Comparison and Critique*

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This paper takes issue with psychologized attempts to explain the tragedy of Jonestown and People's Temple, and offers a corrective to the usual treatments that lump People's Temple with a number of other religious groups, especially the so-called new religions. People's Temple is compared with new religions on eight points: (1) social location and time of inception, (2) characteristics of members and potential members, (3) organizational structure and operation, (4) social control techniques and outside contact, (5) resocialization techniques, (6) theology or ideology, (7) general orientation, and (8) ritual behaviors. Policy implications of failure to discern such differences are also discussed.

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The tragic mass murder/suicide¹ of over 900 People's Temple members in Guyana has been one of the most puzzling and misunderstood events of recent times. Many people have been extremely curious and upset about the People's Temple tragedy, but the troubling event cannot easily be understood. The typical journalistic or official analysis of the episode has been simplistic, and such treatments are not adequate.

Most government investigators and journalists interpret the Guyana situation psychologically — a view that uses psychiatric and personality jargon almost exclusively in explaining the events.² The most extreme example of this approach is the idea that Jones was crazy, and all those people were brainwashed or crazy, and together they did a tragic but crazy thing. That view is indefensible. Jones may have been insane, depending on how the term is defined, but certainly his followers were not insane in any technical sense of the term. The frightening thing about most of Jones' followers is that they were amazingly normal.³

One other disturbing and misleading aspect of media treatments of People's Temple has been the tendency to treat the People's Temple as but one of the many new religious groups in our society, thus assuming that People's Temple was like these other groups in important ways. A discussion of the People's Temple might therefore include material on the Hare Krishna, Unification Church, the Manson group, and/or The Children of God, thus implying, if not explicitly stating, that such groups share crucial features.⁴ This assumption is questionable, as will now be demonstrated.

1. Because of the negligence of U.S. officials in not ordering immediate autopsies on those who died in Guyana, we will probably never know how many died by suicide and how many were murdered. Dr. Leslie Mootoo, Chief Medical Examiner for the Guyana Government and the first medically trained person to arrive at Jonestown, told reporters, "I do not believe there were ever more than 200 persons who died voluntarily." He said this after an inspection of a number of bodies and of the scene of the deaths. (This question has been most fully discussed in a series of articles by Deirdre Griswold in *Workers World* (November 24, December 15, December 22, 1978), a series which also poses some questions about possible CIA involvement in the Jonestown tragedy. Griswold, who accuses the U.S. Government of deliberately destroying evidence by not performing autopsies, points out a number of intriguing ties between People's Temple and the CIA. She suggests that some of the white leaders in Jonestown may have been CIA agents, and Jonestown may have been a tragic pawn in political struggles involving the U.S., Cuba, and Guyana. The negligence of the U.S. Government in not ordering immediate autopsies is nearly inexplicable, and the Government has been severely criticized by many, including medical professionals, for its actions in the matter. Only seven complete autopsies were ever done, and these took place after the bodies were back in the U.S. three weeks after the deaths. (See Griswold's December 22 *Worker's World* piece for information on this debate, along with the *New York Times* of December 19, 1978, and especially Witten, 1979.) This paper assumes that a sizable number of people did indeed commit suicide, and tries to help understand that strange event.

2. This writer was interviewed by a number of major newspapers, news magazines, and electronic media immediately after the Jonestown tragedy but experienced difficulty getting most to adopt anything but this psychologized view that used concepts like "brainwashing," and "mind control." Such terms also appear in official reports concerning the tragedy. The voluminous but shallow "Report of a Staff Investigative Group" (U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs, 1979: 17) states ". . . we have concluded that (Jones) was first and foremost a master of mind control. Among the tactics he practiced with engineered precision are the following recognized strategies of brainwashing. . . ." Then there follows a crude listing of some notions that have appeared in the journalistic literature about "brainwashing."

3. Most people assume that anyone committing suicide must be insane. We have difficulty accepting the idea that people could, on the basis of information available to them, make a rational decision to terminate their lives. And yet this could well have been the case in Jonestown, a point we return to in the concluding pages.

4. See *Newsweek's* December 4, 1978 article entitled "The World of the Cults," which discusses the four

COMPARING PEOPLE'S TEMPLE TO "OTHER NEW RELIGIONS"

The focus of this presentation will be a comparison between the People's Temple group and other new religious groups which have come to public attention in the past ten years or so. The comparison will be from a sociological, historical, and cultural point of view, thus demonstrating what is overlooked by adopting a psychologized view. In lumping together "other new religious groups" to compare with People's Temple, this paper is, in a sense, also erring by failing to differentiate between groups. However, since People's Temple was so different from the groups usually mentioned in discussions of new religious movements, this kind of comparison seems justified.⁵

The major differences between People's Temple and most of the "new religions" fall into eight areas: (1) social location and time of their inception; (2) characteristics of members and potential members; (3) organizational structure and operation; (4) social control techniques and contact with the "outside world"; (5) resocialization techniques; (6) "theology" or ideology; (7) general orientation; and (8) ritual behaviors.

Time and "Place" of Origin

One important difference between People's Temple and new religious groups is the time and social location of inception. Most of the new religious groups discussed in the media today — groups such as the Hare Krishna, the Jesus Movement groups, 3HO, the Divine Light Mission — developed in America in the late 1960's and some of them did not surface until around 1970. Some new religious groups did have a few members in America in the early 1960's but attracted only a small following at that time. (The Unification Church, for instance, was studied in its inception by sociologist John Lofland, who wrote about them in *Doomsday Cult*, published first in 1966, and reissued with an update in 1977. In that book Lofland does not even suggest that the small group he studied would become part of a large new movement, as turned out to be the case.

The social, demographic, political, and economic conditions of the 1960's combined to produce a situation extremely conducive to the inception of new (at least for our society) religions. The largest generation of young people in America's history — many of whom were "shaken loose" from the social structure of America by events like the Viet Nam war, pervasive racism, and drug experiences — was willing to listen to new messages from the East and to new interpretations of the traditional Judeo-Christian message. Many listened and a significant number joined or "converted," some looking

groups mentioned, for a good example. So, too, is *Snapping* (Conway & Siegleman, 1979). This popularized book attempts to link everything from the "Son of Sam" and the Symbionise Liberation Army to Campus Crusade for Christ in its effort to support its simplistic thesis on personality change. The paperback version has a "postscript" on Jonestown that the authors use implicitly to say, "We told you so."

5. I do not include Synanon in this grouping of "other new religious groups," as has been done by some commentators. My position differs somewhat from that of Hall (1979), whose treatment assumes some important similarities between People's Temple and certain new religious groups. Jim Beckford, after reading a draft of this paper, took issue with my assumption of homogeneity among new religious groups, and cited the Unification Church and the Children of God as exceptions. See especially Robbins, *et al.*, (1978) and also books such as Glock and Bellah (1976) and Needleman and Baker (1978) for informative treatments of research and theorizing on new religious groups.

for new “meaning” in a “world gone mad,” others trying to achieve or maintain experiential levels of which drugs had made them aware, and some seeking “community” (see Richardson, *et al.*, 1979, Enroth, *et al.*, 1972; Davis & Richardson, 1976; Glock & Bellah, 1976; Wuthnow, 1976; Needleman & Baker, 1978; Downton, 1979; Judah, 1974, for evidence).

The origin of People’s Temple was profoundly different. It started in the 1950’s in the midwest in a totally different milieu, as a reaction to a social and cultural situation that was extremely racist. Jones was affected by the racism of his area, but he somehow apparently overcame that racism and for a time developed an interracial, somewhat egalitarian church, with a major mission of helping disadvantaged people. His efforts to form such a church led to some personal persecution by local citizenry, which may well have contributed to the paranoia felt by Jones throughout his life.⁶ Later he did establish the People’s Temple group in California, but even then he and his group were not really part of the “new religions” scene that gained so much media attention when America’s affluent white children started joining in sizable numbers. Jones moved first to Ukiah then later to San Francisco, locating in the predominantly black Fillmore district, where his new ministry flourished. Thus it is plain that even in San Francisco the social context of People’s Temple was different from that of other religious groups that formed there around 1970.

Member Characteristics

People’s Temple also started with different kinds of people and had, up until that fateful day in November, 1978, different kinds of people in it. Most of the “other” new religious groups in the news have been peopled by white individuals of middle class origins. In Jesus Movement groups I and my colleagues have studied, for example, the level of education has been relatively high, and members are usually young, Caucasian, and unmarried at the time of joining. Such characteristics are found in other “new religions”; they make up the “target population” for the new groups. (The Unification Church, with its policy of racial integration and practice of interracial marriage is a notable exception to the dominant Caucasian motif of most new groups.)

This “target population” did not, however, provide the bulk of membership in People’s Temple. The People’s Temple group was 70%-80% black (even if most of the defectors discussed in the media were white⁷), and generally its members were from lower class backgrounds. It had especially few whites of the type in other new groups, and those whites who were members seemed to congregate in the upper echelons of the authority structure. People’s Temple also attracted many entire families, which contrasts sharply with the singles scene in the other religious groups and, since families joined, a good proportion were children. According to Archie Smith, Jr. (1979), 137 of the dead at Jonestown were 11 years old or younger. Another sizable proportion

6. See Hall’s (1979) discussion of this key aspect of Jones’ background.

7. One would expect that the people in People’s Temple who had the most education and the “longest list” of alternatives by which they could live would be the most prone to defect from a group. These were the whites, and they did.

of members were older, there being 199 Social Security recipients in Jonestown on November 18, 1978.

The best analogy that can be drawn between People's Temple and any other religious group is drawn with the Father Divine Movement, an organization mimicked by the organization that Jim Jones operated. Indeed, early in his career Jim Jones spent some time studying Divine's methods and visited Divine's center of activities in Philadelphia. Jones even used some of Divine's hymns in People's Temple services.⁸ In this sense, People's Temple was not really new at all, but was instead something of a perverted extension of a long tradition of urban blacks affiliating with sects and cults that offered them some "this-worldly" relief from their extreme destitution. (This point has also been made recently by Lincoln & Mamiya, 1979; Archie Smith, 1979. Those desiring to understand People's Temple would be well-advised also to study Washington, 1973; Fauset, 1944; and Burnham's recent study of Father Divine, 1979.)⁹

Organizational Structure

The organization of People's Temple was not complicated. Jones set up a relatively authoritarian structure with few layers: He kept power well centralized in his hands; he was the absolute authority of the organization, and played a large role in the day-to-day operations of People's Temple. This type of organizational structure has historical antecedents, as Hall (1979: 54-55) points out in his discussion of "other worldly communal groups" in American history. Particularly when such groups organized under a charismatic leader in a single location, authoritarianism has been a regular result.

Below Jones in People's Temple organization was a second level sometimes referred to by him as "the angels" (a term also used by Father Divine to refer to his immediate advisors). This group was made up of 15 to 20 people who were Jones' private group of counselors and workers. Most of these were women (also the case with Father Divine), and they tended to be attractive, tall, white women. There were very few blacks ever allowed in that high level group. Below the angels in the group was another organizational level, known as "the planning commission." This commission,

8. Especially in light of the mass murder/suicide in Guyana it is difficult to assess the purity of Jones' motives in developing a group that relied mostly on poor blacks for its membership and for much of the financial resources of the group. Some accuse him of blatantly exploiting his "target population" and doing so with little real concern for their plight in racist America. Thus, Jones is thought by some to be a shyster and a crook. Others defend his earlier efforts to develop a racially integrated and egalitarian church, and instead suggest that in recent years Jones changed dramatically for the worse.

9. This analogy does not intend to impugn the motives and efforts of famous black leaders like Father Divine or Sweet Daddy Grace by suggesting that People's Temple was exactly like earlier black sects and cults. Such is not the case, especially the fact that Jones was white. Obviously there is something grotesque about a white American minister leading his flock of black followers into mass murder and suicide. Nothing like this has ever come out of the black religious movements of urban America, some of which apparently accomplished much to relieve suffering of blacks in material and psychological terms.

The black church has had a difficult time assimilating the Jonestown tragedy, as evidence by reports of a conference held in February, 1979, in San Francisco, under the joint sponsorship of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the National Conference of Black Churchmen, around the theme "A Consultation on the Implications of Jonestown for the Black Church and for the Nation." See Major (1979) and Sun Reporter Editorials (1979) on the conference.

composed of around 100 people, was the group before which occurred a lot of the "disciplinary actions" now so well known. The planning commission was responsible for many of the day-to-day chores of operating People's Temple. It was also in charge of bus pilgrimages and other large group activities such as attending political rallies and voting. About two-thirds of the planning commission members were white, one-third black. At the bottom of the organization structure were the followers, who were mostly black (and, as has been noted, mostly poor as well). Thus, People's Temple had a four-level "shallow" structure that allowed considerable direct control by Jones. After developing the Guyana outpost, another organizational element was added, this being work cadres built around certain tasks. This structural embellishment was strictly functional and did little to dilute Jones' authority, especially after Jones' unexpected arrival there in 1977.

Jones also apparently was an extremely charismatic person, which augmented his structural authority. Some stories from his childhood talk about him as a person who could get the other children to obey him (see *Newsweek*, Dec. 4, 1978: 54). He apparently had a personal gift, even if it did go awry during his last few years. (See Johnson, 1979, for a sociological examination of Jones' charisma.)

Sharply contrasted with the "shallow" and greatly centralized People's Temple organization are most of the newer religious groups to which it is usually compared. Certainly some of the new groups are more authoritarian than others, but, contrary to popular belief, most of the new groups are not nearly so tightly centralized and authoritarian as was People's Temple. Especially is this the case for widely dispersed international organizations like the Children of God, which has considerable decentralization in its world organization. Research done on the COG has delineated a twelve-level structure of authority for this worldwide organization (see Davis & Richardson, 1976), and firsthand experience has revealed much evidence for local autonomy on most matters. Another large U.S. Jesus Movement group studied in depth (see Richardson, *et al.*, 1979), was found to be similar in this regard. With communes of this well-differentiated organization in nearly thirty different states, centralized control of the kind often attributed to such new religious groups is not possible, even if desired by leaders. Such widely-dispersed groups cannot function without decentralization, and without "deeper" authority structures. This truism is also illustrated by the Unification Church organization (see Bromley, *et al.*, 1979).

This organizational contrast between People's Temple and other new religious groups was made even more distinct with the rapid move to Guyana, simply because this move brought nearly all members of that group together in one location.

It should also be noted that few, if any, of the other new religious groups use security guards as part of the organization, as apparently was the case in Guyana (and also while People's Temple was still in America). Having an organizational security force may indicate important differences between People's Temple and other groups, which apparently perceive no need for such protection.¹⁰ The presence of security guards may just be another indication of ties to the tradition of black cults in America, where having guards was sometimes something of a status symbol, but there could be other meanings as well.

10. A few reports have come in of armed guards around Unification properties, but these are unverified as yet.

Social Control and Contact with "Outside World"

The kind of spatial arrangements and authority structure just described for People's Temple lends itself very well to considerable social control of members' behavior and even beliefs. Before leaving the U. S., Jones had much contact with his followers in regularized meeting situations, and he was apparently very gifted and even deceptive at exploiting that forum. He was a skilled orator and plied his talents well with his followers, who tended to accept what he told them, including his claims of massive plans by his enemies to destroy him and People's Temple. The planning commission meetings where strong disciplinary measures were sometimes taken against members who did not please Jones added an important element of social control (see Kilduff & Javer, 1978: 60-65).¹¹

There are also some accusations of questionable suicides and possible murders of defecting members and others. Phil Tracy's (1977) ironically titled article "Strange Suicides," which discussed two questionable suicides, appeared in August, 1977. Kerns (with Ward, 1979) has a chapter entitled "Eight Mysterious Deaths," which focuses on members who died under strange circumstances and implies that some if not all were murdered. And, as is well known, Congressman Leo Ryan's interest in People's Temple was aroused when a close friend told him that his son had been found dead only one day after the son had decided to quit People's Temple. Such accusations and unanswered questions raise the specter of brutality and violence in People's Temple even before the move to Guyana. Although there have been very few rumors of mysterious deaths in the Children of God and other new groups, nothing like the number of such instances in People's Temple can be found. Most scholars dismiss such rumors about new religious groups as atrocity tales, but perhaps in the case of People's Temple they were more than rumors.

When Jones unexpectedly moved to the Guyana outpost in 1977, the situation allowed even more direct control of members behaviors than had been the case in the U.S. Jonestown was five miles from the nearest settlement, and the only way out of the general area was by plane or boat. Jones told members horror stories about tigers and snakes and human enemies in the jungle, which deterred thoughts of leaving. Apparently he even had at least one fake attack (complete with a few gunshots) launched against the settlement to support his claims of conspiracies to destroy Jonestown. One or two people did "escape," as described in some of the "instant book" accounts (see Chapter 9 of Kilduff & Javers, 1978), but most were apparently not even interested in trying. Members seemed content with life at Jonestown, even though that life became much more difficult after Jones and several hundred other people unexpectedly arrived in 1977.¹²

11. The thoughtful paper by Easton, *et al.*, (1979) is particularly concerned about the passivity and gullibility of People's Temple members.

12. Original plans were to develop Jonestown gradually, but publication of the critical 1977 *New West* article (Kilduff & Tracy, 1977) and the child custody battle with the Stoens led Jones to make a dramatic and virtually total move of People's Temple to Jonestown. When the large group arrived, the planned jungle community was less than one third built, and thus cabins originally meant for four occupants became the crowded residences for sixteen to twenty people. A number of severe practical and logistics problems resulted from this rapid influx of people and the overcrowding that resulted.

Jonestown was not a prison camp. There was a school, and informal study groups of participants were formed. Flowers were planted by members to beautify the place, and there was a general sense of well-being apparent in most members, even though the jungle compound was extremely crowded. However, leaving was difficult. No one was allowed contact with the outside world without permission, and most outsiders were not welcome either, as Leo Ryan's party found out. Physical punishment was employed on occasion as a way of maintaining control of members, but as Hall (1979: 54-55) notes, tight control and discipline are the rule in many types of situations that involve communal sectarian groups and other "total institutions." Guns were present in Jonestown, but they totalled only about 30, and were not automatic weapons. This ratio of guns to people is considerably lower than the guns-to-people ratio in the U.S. as a whole (estimates range up to 200 million guns in America), and it is not surprising that some guns were present in the jungle setting.¹³

Social control in People's Temple also relates to what might be labeled "contact with the outside world." For most new religious groups there is a fair degree of deliberate social and even geographic isolation initially, but over time contact with the outside world increases. Oftentimes, this contact is as evangelizers, but at least it is contact. Generally, the new groups become less wary about the dominant society and even institutionalize such contact.

People's Temple seemed to develop in an opposite fashion. There was more contact with the outside world initially, and for some time thereafter through all the many service arms of the organization. But later the organization, under Jones' direction, seemed to withdraw into itself more. Possibly this was a reaction to criticism that the group encountered, which gained strong impetus, especially in 1977 with the publication of the now famous *New West* article (Kilduff & Tracy, 1977). Before moving to Guyana, it was apparently engaged in less such outward-oriented activities and instead had more long meetings, with Jones speaking to the members or with the planning commission. After the move to Guyana, members were almost totally cut off from contact with non-group members. This lack of contact contributed to the social control in People's Temple.

Resocialization Techniques

The techniques of resocialization used in People's Temple also apparently differed from those practiced by most new religions. The important fact should be understood, if only because so much attention has been focused on recruitment techniques of new religious groups. The popular images of "mind control," "brainwashing," and "coercive persuasion" have, much to the distress of the new religious groups, been associated with joining such groups. Those images have sometimes been used to justify punitive actions against certain of the new groups, including, as has been mentioned, deprogramming some of their members. The tragedy in Guyana has added to this problem, since some deprogrammers and their sympathizers want to lump

13. Contrary to initial reports by Mark Lane, there were apparently only six shots fired at the time of the mass murder/suicide (see *Los Angeles Times*, December 21, 1978). Those shots killed two dogs, Mr. Mugs the pet monkey (two bullets), Jim Jones, and Ann Moore, who may have been the last to die. Only two guns were fired at this time (other weapons were used earlier to assail Leo Ryan's party).

People's Temple together with other new religions, apparently to help justify their own positions.¹⁴

There are always some problems of interpretation associated with accepting "atrocious tales" told by defectors from groups (see Bromley, *et al.*, 1979), because of the possibility that defectors are involved in either conscious or unconscious self-serving behavior when they recount "how terrible it was." Even taking this tendency into account, however, one is left with the impression that life in People's Temple was at least rigorous and perhaps even grim for many members during the latter years of the organization's history. There is considerable agreement on this point between accounts by different people and sources, and there is some physical evidence of strange activities (such as the self-incrimination letters). We read tales of physical punishments of various kinds, of sleep deprivation, and of the development of feelings of guilt and humiliation in members. We read of techniques used to break down normal relationships between family members — the rewarding of children for "telling" on their parents, and the use of sex (including forced abstinence in married couples) to break down husband-wife ties. Certainly any communal group must have discipline and must constrain affective ties that might compete with those for the collectivity, as Hall (1979) and Kanter (1972) point out, but in People's Temple this aspect appears overdone. The picture that one gets from many accounts — if they truly represent normal life in People's Temple — is one that shares at least some important facets with the thought reform model developed by R. J. Lifton in his study of resocializing Chinese intellectuals around 1950 in China. Jones was not as systematic as the Communists in China, but perhaps he did not have to be to accomplish his ends.¹⁵

Although there are some charges to the contrary for certain new religious groups, resocialization techniques in new religious groups cannot easily be classified as thought reform or brainwashing. The techniques *can* be viewed as effective persuasion, but key elements of the thought reform model (such as physical coercion) are simply not present. Scholarly research on some of the major groups to which People's Temple has been compared substantiates this point. The work of Davis and Richardson (1976) on the Children of God; that of Richardson, *et al.*, (1979) on another large Jesus Movement organization; that of Lofland (1977 and 1978) and of Bromley, *et al.*, (1979) on the Unification Church; that of Judah (1974) on the Hare Krishna; and that of Downton (1979) on the Divine Light Mission all support the conclusion that physical coercion is not a part of the recruitment processes of these new religious groups.¹⁶

14. There is no record of which I am aware of *anyone's* being deprogrammed from People's Temple. This fact may be related to the class and racial origins of most members and thus the inability of members' relatives to pay for it. Or it may be the fact that, until the Guyana tragedy, this group was of no concern to those opposed to newer religions. In either case it now seems a bit strange to see deprogrammers and others in the "anti-cult movement" using Jonestown to buttress their claims.

15. There is disagreement on what life in People's Temple and in Jonestown was like. My discussions with Charles Garry and with the Rev. John Moore and his wife (whose two daughters and a grandson died at Jonestown), all of whom had visited Jonestown, call into question especially the worst of the atrocity tales of defectors and detractors.

16. *Newsweek*, in its special issue on the Jonestown tragedy (December 4, 1978), compared People's Temple to the Charles Manson group (The Family of Infinite Love). Although there were some religious elements to the Manson Family, it is not usually treated as a new religious group. The Manson group resocialization processes

That is not to say that the techniques of newer religions are ineffective; indeed they are, as the “love bombing” of the Unification Church has demonstrated (see Lofland, 1978). But well-done “love bombing” should not be mistaken for physical coercion, and encouraging people to spend a week-end at the country retreat should not be confused with virtual isolation in the jungles of Guyana.

Theology or Ideology

Most of the new religious groups to which People’s Temple is often compared are promoting an Americanized version of theologies that are very old. Even the Eastern oriented new groups adopted versions of religious philosophers with long histories, even if that history was unfamiliar to most people in our society. Predictably, the groups espousing versions of Western Judeo-Christian theology were generally accepted and treated better. Most of the Jesus Movement groups, for instance, were accepted by the greater society and encouraged by it, because they were, after all, espousing new variations of fundamentalist christianity, which is the “rock from whence we are hewn” (see Richardson, 1974, 1978b, 1979 and Balswick, 1974). Members of such groups may have acted and dressed a little different, but that was generally viewed as better than being on drugs or involved in radical political action. (The reaction to the Children of God seems to be a partial exception to this more tolerant view.) Moreover, both Eastern- and Western-oriented new religious groups (and those of eclectic groups such as the Unification Church) reflect Western culture’s emphasis on individualism; they all tend to interpret problems and solutions to problems in individualistic ways, even if specific concepts differ among the groups (see Richardson, 1978a and Martin, 1965 for more on individualistic religion).

The People’s Temple theology or ideology was quite different, as has been noted by John Hall (1979). For one thing, Jones started out in the middle 1950’s building a racially integrated church in a small town in the midwest, which was overtly racist at the time. Thus, People’s Temple contained an element that is quite muted in “other” new groups, which are nearly all Caucasian and concerned very little with race. With Jones, racial equality was an integral part of his overt “theology,” even if the fact that whites dominated the authority structure seems to vitiate the point in practice.

Another key aspect of Jones’ theology which is counter to that of recent religious groups was a belief in socialism. Why Jones adopted socialism is unclear, but it probably has something to do with his rejecting American society because of racism. Whatever the reason, Jones adopted fairly early in his professional career a socialist-oriented philosophy, and in his own way he set out to implement this view. His adoption of socialism has caused much difficulty for Socialists, who do not want to claim Jones as a fellow traveler any more than do members of new religious groups. Some left-oriented writers put distance between themselves and Jones, as illustrated by several writings which attempt to discredit Jones’ brand of socialism (see Moberg, 1978a, 1978b; Griswold, 1978a, 1978b, 1978c; and Easton, *et al.*, 1979).

Jones integrated these elements — racial equality and socialism — in People’s

did apparently involve some physical coercion. See Melton (1979) for a direct comparison of People’s Temple and the Manson Family.

Temple and earned much criticism for his efforts. This criticism helped encourage a conspiracy theory that became an integral part of his theology; there was always some conspiracy by people out to get him or so he thought.¹⁷ Other recent groups such as the Children of God, Scientology, the Unification Church, and the Hare Krishna have also been criticized and challenged, and have developed some paranoia as a result (see Shupe, 1978, for example). But the causes of the paranoia for Jones and his group appear to be different, stemming in part from Jones' personality but also significantly from America's historical lack of tolerance for racial equality and for socialistic ideas.

One other key aspect of Jones' beliefs that demands attention is his "theology of suicide," which offers a sharp contrast with other religious groups of recent times, all of which negatively sanction suicide.¹⁸ Jones' paranoia may have led him to the idea of suicide, but he adopted the term "revolutionary suicide" from Huey Newton, who wrote a book of that title in which he espouses "dying for a cause." Such suicide is a classic example of what Durkheim called "altruistic suicide" (Durkheim, 1951).¹⁹ Jones opposed individual suicide but advocated collective suicide as a possible and logical outcome of being attacked by forces opposed to his efforts. Thus, suicide in the People's Temple can be compared with the Kamakazi pilots in World War II, the Jews at Masada, York, England in the 1100's, and the 1,000 Japanese civilians on Saipan during the Second World War, just to name a few examples. The common assumption that anyone who commits suicide must be crazy does not survive close scrutiny in any of these cases, especially in the light of Durkheim's perceptive comments on altruistic forms of suicide. As with the other examples, the mass suicide at Jonestown was "dying for a cause" for the more politically oriented, and it was achieving "other worldly salvation" for the more religious (see Hall, 1979: 61 and Lifton, 1979, especially, for more on these ideas).

General Orientation

One can talk of specific beliefs such as socialism, racial equality, and suicide, but another area which should be considered is the general orientation of a group. Most of

17. Jones' paranoia was given a large boost at a crucial time when Mark Lane, in an effort to secure Jones and People's Temple as a client, wrote a nine page memo entitled "Counter Offensive: Projected Offensive Program for the People's Temple." This document, given to Jones in September, 1978 earned Lane \$10,000. It begins:

"Even a cursory examination reveals that there had been a coordinated campaign to destroy People's Temple and to impugn the reputation of its leader Bishop Jim Jones. This campaign has involved various agencies of the U. S. Government, agencies of various states and the actions of numerous individuals. . . . Among the suspect organizations are the Central Intelligence Agency, the F.B.I., the I.R.S., the U.S. Post Office, the Federal Communications Commission and their agents. . . ."

18. There are reports that the Unification Church teaches its members how to slash wrists as a ploy to escape deprogramming. Since the goal of this alleged training is escape, not death, it seems markedly different from and even minor in comparison to what happened at Jonestown (see Carroll & Bauer, 1979). Other such accusations with new religious groups seem unfounded.

19. One very intriguing fictional account of "religious suicide" (which I wonder if Jim Jones read) is Gore Vidal's novel, *Messiah*, a novel about a new religion that developed in this country and swept around the world. This plausible-sounding religion was built around the idea that suicide is good instead of bad. In the intriguing novel people were encouraged by an extremely charismatic leader to die voluntarily, and die they did, by suicide.

the new religious groups of the 1960's were oriented toward individual evangelism and/or toward personal self development. When such groups were focused outwardly, it was usually for the purpose only of converting others; otherwise they were inwardly oriented and more introspective. People's Temple was different in this regard, especially earlier in its history, when Jones displayed a more conscious structural orientation, and tried even in a small way to make some changes in society. Many commentators would apparently like to forget that People's Temple was more outwardly oriented during most of its history, and that over the years it helped many people, especially people who had few resources. Over the course of its history, People's Temple operated soup kitchens, child care centers, and infirmaries for the poor. It was engaged in drug rehabilitation programs, legal aid services, homes for the aged, for the retarded, for delinquents, and other such activities. Some think that all this can be discounted as a facade or as a cover for illicit activities, but to do so is probably a mistake. Certainly such humanitarian activities were de-emphasized after the move to Guyana, but much good was accomplished earlier, and even in Guyana free medical services were allowed the Indians who resided in the surrounding jungle. Researchers may some day document more carefully the early activities of People's Temple and help us thus to understand better the shift which apparently occurred during its last few years. However, suffice it to say at this point that, although some other new religious groups have operated a few outreach programs, none compares with the efforts of People's Temple.

One significant expression of the structural orientation of People's Temple was Jones' interest in political matters. The Unification Church has shown some interest in political matters (see Nelson, 1979; and Horowitz, 1979), as has Scientology, but these seem exceptions in the newer religions. Some groups openly deride political involvement of any kind, and many only begrudgingly allow their members to participate in political processes. Such actions generally are not comparable to Jones' efforts to get involved directly in the political processes. Lincoln and Mamiya (1979) even refer to People's Temple as a "political religion," and offer considerable substantiation for their view.

People's Temple members and leaders participated in everything from voting, letter writing, and campaigning, to occupying appointed political offices. Jones had considerable contact with politicians, including some on the national scene. His involvement in San Francisco politics might seem a self-serving effort to gain personal power, but a more benign view might hold that political involvement would be a natural avenue for someone possessing Jones' somewhat collectivistic view of the world. He seemed to assume that structural change (and self-protection for himself and his organization) was best accomplished through political action and political power. His efforts on behalf of a free press also may have derived from a belief in the value of a free press for encouraging change. However, he appears to have been interested in direct manipulation of the press as well, and was even somewhat successful at such efforts, at least until *New West* finally published its expose by Kilduff and Tracy in August 1977.

Rituals

No group can exist without rituals, be it a Jesus Movement group or the People's Temple. Even groups which decry rituals and overtly disallow them can be accused of turning their anti-ritualism into a ritual. This brief paper cannot begin to describe the richness of ritual behaviors that pervade new religious movements, but one major point can be made. Usually those rituals have been entered into with sincerity and with considerable symbolic meaning for the participants. This point should be made for most participants in People's Temple as well, even if there is evidence that Jones manipulated ritual behavior to accomplish his own ends. According to some reports, Jones claimed to have lost faith in the Christian message several years ago. He was perhaps cynically using that message with its rich symbolism to conceal his true aims of preaching socialism (see Novak's December 18, 1978, *Washington Star* column).

Aside from this possible difference in the way rituals were used in People's Temple and other recent religious groups, there is one specific crucial ritual used by Jones in a way that bears examination. Accounts of the last few years of People's Temple all refer to group sessions in which those present were required to drink liquids that were said to be poison. If such reports are correct, this suicide-oriented ritual behavior pattern was repeated several, perhaps even many, times in recent years. Sometimes the people participating were told the liquid was poison before they drank and sometimes afterward, but the point is that they were given something to drink and also an interpretation of their action: these were "suicide drills," but they were also a ritual analogous to one as old as Christendom itself.

Jones seemed to understand the basic fact that ritual is often more important than belief; behavior usually predates belief. At the very least, the drills were analogous to fire drills for school children practicing what to do in a time of danger. But the significance of these "drills" was possibly much greater. Anthony Wallace's discussion of the ritual process in *Religion: An Anthropological View* (1966) emphasizes the great value of "pre-learning" to that process. Pre-learning refers to the presence of previously learned cognitive elements. Jones took advantage of the symbolic quality already present in consuming a liquid in a religious ritual, and he added new cognitive material concerning the "revolutionary suicide" interpretation of the event. This combination of the old and new was extremely significant, and Jones succeeded all too well in making a thunderous point for his political and social views. Leo Ryan's visit was a catalyst that triggered this most dramatic conclusion to People's Temple, but the stage for this tragic multiple murder/suicide had been set much earlier through Jones' use of ritual.²⁰

POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF THE DIFFERENCES

The repeated failure to recognize important differences between People's Temple and other new religious groups of the 1960's and 1970's has important policy implications. The kinds of images people have about new religious groups can influence

20. Melton (1979) makes a similar point when he discusses the importance of practicing "creepy crawling" in people's homes by the Manson group prior to the Tate murders.

governmental policies of many types toward such groups, and these images are subject to manipulation by "anti-cult" groups (see Shupe & Bromley, 1979). Thus, it is extremely important that people come to an understanding of what happened in Guyana, and how People's Temple compares with other allegedly similar groups. For example, deprogramming was already a large business and it may have increased under the impact of Jonestown. Ted Patrick, the "father" of deprogramming, claims to have participated in 1600 deprogrammings, and he has made public statements after the Jonestown tragedy saying, ineffect, "I told you so; we shall suppress all these new cults" (see *San Francisco Chronicle*, p. 3, Nov. 21, 1978). Thus, we are seeing what many judge to be an increase in attacks on First Amendment freedom of religion given more impetus as a result of the Guyana tragedy.²¹ This includes a "backlash" toward new religions that have been given impetus by the Jonestown tragedy (see Harley, 1979 and Robbins & Anthony, 1979).

Less dramatic pressures are being felt by new religious groups as well. For instance, the most pervasive social control agency in our society — the IRS — has also been involved in regulating new religions because most such groups want to be tax exempt, which means they have to follow certain rules and procedures. The IRS has come under the increasing pressure to be more stringent in its regulation of new religious groups, and this pressure may have increased as a result of the Jonestown tragedy.

This presentation has attempted, through a comparison with a number of other new religious groups, to furnish a better understanding of the actual organization and functioning of People's Temple and how it could have been involved in such an act of "revolutionary suicide." I hope such understanding will lead to more informed policy decisions in this troublesome area.

Before concluding, I should say that the presentation does *not* address some of the many remaining questions concerning what happened in Guyana. For instance, this paper did not focus on the recurring accusations in some of the left-oriented press that the destruction of Jonestown was caused, at least in part, by a government conspiracy involving the CIA and FBI.²² This paper also does not try to explain why the military and government officials bungled the medical examination of the victims so thoroughly that we actually cannot say conclusively why and how the vast majority died. This well-documented series of oversights concerning the medical exams is very troubling and has yet to be explained (see footnote 1). Such unanswered questions fuel the fires of distrust in the left-oriented community in America and elsewhere. I would add that the well-publicized "official studies" of the tragedy only briefly address the conspiracy question, and they do not raise the medical examination problem at all. Such reports

21. There is considerable debate over whether the First Amendment is under duress because of the efforts of deprogrammers. For a discussion of this and other germane issues, see the forthcoming edited volume by this author entitled *The Brainwashing-Deprogramming Controversy* (Transaction Books) and the March, 1980 issue of *Society*, which includes shortened versions of several of the papers in the edited book. Also, see the November, 1979 special issue of *The Annals* on the topic "The Uneasy Boundary: Church and State."

22. See *The Black Panther*, December 15 and 29, 1978 issues, and the January 12, 1979 issue, especially. The latter contains the story about Dick Gregory's charges that Jonestown was destroyed by a covert "major American military operation." Also, see Griswold's articles in *Worker's World* of November 24, December 15, and December 22, 1978.

only seem interested in absolving certain groups and individuals of any blame while scapegoating others. They do little to explain what happened and why. (See Crimmins & Carpenter, 1979, the U. S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs May 15, 1979 Hearing Report, and the report of the Staff Investigative Group to the Committee on Foreign Affairs dated May 15, 1979.)²³

Thus, this address is not the "last word" on all aspects of the Jonestown tragedy. A number of "last words" need to be spoken, but only someone who has security clearance to read the many classified sections of the House Staff Investigative Group Report to the Committee on Foreign Affairs and other classified material can possibly give those answers. Efforts I have made to delve further into those aspects of the tragedy have not been fruitful, in part because of not having security clearance.

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23. Perhaps what is most astonishing is that government bureaucrats have turned the Jonestown investigation into an attack of the Privacy Act and the Freedom of Information Act. In what is supposedly the major study of the tragedy (by the Staff Investigative Group of the Committee on Foreign Affairs) the recommendations start with a recommendation to review provisions of these two major acts, both of which are not liked by most bureaucrats. The next recommendation is to review IRS rules and regulations regarding churches. Implicit in these is that the fault for the tragedy is in the new laws and the lax work of the IRS regarding such groups. The State Department is also criticized (third recommendation), and the last two recommendations deal with NIMH sponsoring more research on cults and including cults as a topic in the White House Conference on the Family.

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