Apocalypse Observed: Religious Movements and Violence in North America, Europe, and Japan. With Philip D. Schuyler and Sylvaine Trinh (London: Routledge, 2000).

Chapter 1

The Apocalypse at Jonestown

Two years to the day after the 19 April 1993 conflagration at the Branch Davidians' Mount Carmel compound near Waco, Texas, a bomb destroyed the federal building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, killing at least 167 people and injuring hundreds more. Two years after that, in April 1997, jury selection finally began in the trial of Timothy McVeigh, the man eventually convicted of the bombing. Anticipating the upcoming trial, The New Yorker magazine's "Talk of the Town" section led with a piece where Scott Malcomson (1997) recounted his visit to "Elohim City" — a dirt-poor white-separatist Christian fundamentalist community in the Ozarks. Over supper after church on Sunday, the sect's founder, Robert G. Millar, mentioned to Malcomson that he had met a Pastor Jones in the 1950s, "a good pastor," he called him. Did the New Yorker writer remember Jones? "Oh yes, the man in Guyana," Malcomson replied, ending his piece, "Yes, I remembered him."

Thus readers encountered yet another allusion to the first mass suicide in modern times. Jonestown was the communal settlement founded by Peoples Temple in the small, poor, socialistic country of Guyana, on the Caribbean coast of South America. On 17 November 1978, a congressman from California, Leo Ryan, arrived there on an investigative expedition, accompanied by journalists and some sect opponents who called themselves the "Concerned Relatives." The next day, Ryan and four other people — three newsmen and a young defector — were

murdered at an airstrip several miles from Jonestown as they prepared to depart with more than a dozen defectors that the visitors had brought out of the jungle utopian community. While this carnage unfolded, back at Jonestown, the Temple's white charismatic leader, Jim Jones, orchestrated a "revolutionary suicide" where the members of the agricultural community — mostly black, some white — drank a deadly potion of Fla-Vor Aid laced with poison. Counting the murders at the airstrip, 918 people died.[1]

Well before Timothy McVeigh's trial, "Jonestown" had become so infamous as the ultimate "cult" nightmare that Malcomson could invoke the mere name of its leader as a chilling conclusion to his story about an isolated, radically anti-establishment religious community of true believers. In his short, sophisticated New Yorker report, Malcomson symbolically aligned Waco, the Oklahoma City bombing, and Jonestown with the racist survivalist sect he had visited, all without saying much of substance about any of these episodes. He offered no reflection on even the most immediately intriguing question raised by Elohim leader Robert Millar's mention of Jim Jones — why was a right-wing racist fundamentalist praising the founder of Peoples Temple, a left-wing religious movement dedicated to racial integration?

The power of Malcomson's piece hinges on the mention of Jim Jones, but the rhetorical form of this mentioning depends on glossing any understanding of what happened at Jonestown. Instead, it plays to a generalized collective memory that has enshrined Jones in popular culture as the image incarnate of the Antichrist, and Peoples Temple as the paragon of the religious "cult." Fed by a flood of news articles, a film, a television docudrama, more than twenty books, and countless oblique allusions, this collective memory now floats free from what, in a simpler

era, historians used to like to think of as facts. But when we search for the sources of this memory, they trace back to the "Concerned Relatives" — the organization that had opposed Peoples Temple in the first place, and to the representatives of the media whom the Temple opponents drew into the ill-fated journey to Jonestown. After the murders and mass suicide, the Concerned Relatives became the outsiders with the most knowledge about a group that had carried out an appalling act of mass suicide. Indeed, because the Concerned Relatives had consistently sought to raise the alarm against Peoples Temple before 18 November 1978, they could take the mass suicide as sad validation of their concerns. But by the same token, popular accounts of Jonestown heavily depended on the accounts of the Concerned Relatives, and these accounts tended to suppress a crucial question. Did the actions of the Concerned Relatives and the media in any way contribute to the grisly outcome of events in which they were not only observers, but also participants?

Given the tragic deaths, the cultural opponents had a vital interest in denying that their actions had any consequences. This interest may help account for their consistent promotion of a doctrine of cult essentialism, whereby the dynamics of religious movements are treated as wholly internal, and unaffected by interaction with the wider social world. Such an analysis would free the cultural opponents and the media from any responsibility for incidents of religious-movement violence. But precisely because the proponents of cult essentialism themselves participated in the events, it is important to give their actions consideration along with other factors that may have contributed to the outcome of murder and mass suicide.

In the absence of this analysis, Jonestown becomes, as Roland Barthes wrote of myths more generally, "a story at once true and unreal" (1972, p. 128). In this case, the story is one of a sick and fiendish man who plotted the deaths of those who would expose his sham community, capping the murder of opponents with the

ritualized ceremonial murder of followers, many of them perhaps good-intentioned, but too naive or powerless to break the hold of Jim Jones, a man sufficiently obsessed with his orchestration of events to die of an apparently self-inflicted gunshot to the head.

Treatment of Peoples Temple as the cultus classicus headed by Jim Jones, psychotic megalomaniac par excellence drifts on a sea of memory, only loosely tied to any moorings of history. Still, like other myths that maintain their power, the one signified by "Jonestown" must be culturally powerful, and perhaps even necessary, for it remains evocative even today. In Barthes's terms, the power of Jonestown is the power of the unreal to offer a meaningful narrative of an event that is otherwise difficult to reconcile with the world as we understand it. The myth of Jonestown has a long half life because it serves vital needs not to understand the murders and mass suicide historically. In effect, the myth of Jonestown displaces history by suppressing alternative narratives that might debunk ideology. Only when this ideological lens is broken can we search for historical explanations.

Devil, psychopath, con artist, Antichrist, Jim Jones was also a discomforting critic of American society, embraced by followers as prophet, redeemer, and friend. His strongest countercultural images borrowed old Protestant ideas about the Church of Rome as the whore of Babylon — ideas that themselves come from deeper apocalyptic wellsprings of Western thought. But Jones transmuted these ideas into a new religious dispensation — of the United States as Babylon, the apocalypse as race and class warfare that would engulf a society trapped in its own hypocrisy. An unrelenting iconoclast, Jones sought to forge a militant movement of people committed to the vision of a utopian alternative to racist, classist, imperialist society. Peoples Temple thus carried a double onus: it was a countercultural communal group and a militant anti-American social

movement.

Communalism per se has long been viewed as a way of life alien to mainstream America. Legitimate organizations such as religious orders and the military may rightly require submission to collective authority, but in public discourse, the collectivism of countercultural organizations flies in the face of the dominant American ideology that embraces capitalism, individualism, and the nuclear family, and it thus is vulnerable to becoming coded as antidemocratic and subversive (cf. Alexander and Smith 1993).

Like other religious social movements, Peoples Temple practiced a communal socialism. Yet unlike most countercultural hippie communes and utopian communal groups of the 1960s and early '70s, Peoples Temple located its communalism in a leftist political vein of crude communism. Jones simultaneously evoked apocalyptic imagery that appealed to members of his audience steeped in the codes of religious rhetoric, and used the political language of class and race to amplify latent resentment among those drawn to his cause. By this dual strategy, he forged a religious radicalism that attracted true believers to a movement framed in militant opposition to American capitalist society. Because Jones so sharply opposed the predominant ideology, that ideology requires that his movement and its demise be misunderstood.

The Jonestown myth can be deconstructed if we ask a straightforward question: "why did the murders and mass suicide occur?" To answer this question without recourse to the lens of ideology brings into view a complex relationship between Peoples Temple and the established social order. As we will see, the carnage in Guyana was not simply the product of the politically infused apocalyptic mentality that took hold within Peoples Temple. Nor can it be explained as wholly the result of Jim Jones's demented manipulations. Jones was more complex than

the caricature of him, and Peoples Temple was both utopia and anti-utopia. "Jonestown" was the disastrous outcome of a protracted conflict between Peoples Temple and a loosely institutionalized but increasingly effective coalition of opponents. But the myth of Jonestown has had consequences of its own. It did not simply arise after apocalyptic history. It has contributed to apocalyptic history.

JIM JONES AND THE ORIGINS OF PEOPLES TEMPLE

Peoples Temple began like many American religious groups — in the mind of a self-styled prophet. James Warren Jones was born in east central Indiana in the time of the Great Depression, 13 May 1931. The only child of white working poor parents (his mother was later rumored to have Indian ancestors), Jones grew up with a strong sense of resentment toward people of wealth, status, and privilege. Exposed as a child to a variety of Protestant churches — from the mainstream Methodists to the pacifist Quakers and the holiness-movement Nazarenes — Jones found himself especially impressed by the religious enthusiasm, revival-style worship, and speaking in tongues that he encountered in the fellowship of the then-marginal Pentecostalists, where he later described finding a "setting of freedom of emotion."

During his high school years Jim Jones preached on the streets in a factory neighborhood of Richmond, Indiana, to an audience of both whites and blacks. In the summer of 1949, he married Marceline Baldwin, a young nurse from a Richmond family of Methodists and Republicans. Marcie was shocked, Jim later recounted, when he revealed the views that he seems to have taken from his mother, namely his sympathies with political communism and his disdain for the "sky god."

In 1951 Jim and Marcie Jones moved to Indianapolis. Although Jim Jones was barely twenty years old at the time, he quickly became a preacher and created a volatile mix of theology and practice. Exposed variously to the Methodists' liberal social creed, communist ideology, and the broadly apocalyptic vision of the Pentecostalists, Jones would promote racial integration and a veiled communist philosophy within a Pentecostal framework that emphasized gifts of the spirit — especially faith healing and the "discerning" of spirits. He displayed a knack for preaching, and he learned some tricks already in use in the mid-South Pentecostal revival circuit — how to convince audiences of his abilities in matters of "discernment" and faith healing by sleights of hand, spying, and fakery. Jones was hardly the first faith healer on the circuit to cause elderly ladies confined to wheel chairs to rise up and walk again, though he may have been the first to come up with the idea of having a perfectly sound leg bone placed in a plaster cast so that it could be removed after a faith healing. Yet for all the deceit, some followers swore that the young minister had the gift of healing, and independent observers later acknowledged that hokum aside, Jones could produce results with a person whose condition "had no major physiological basis."

On the grounds of his religious chicanery alone, Jones would have been hard to distinguish from other self-styled Pentecostalist faith healers of his day. But the audiences attracted by Jones's gifts of the spirit encountered something far different than other tent-camp evangelists and small-time preachers who operated in the mid-South.

Organizationally, Jones started in Indianapolis with a small church called Community Unity. His first important break came when visitors from the Pentecostalist Laurel Street Tabernacle in Indianapolis took in his services following a successful revival appearance that he had made in Detroit, Michigan. In

September 1954 some of the visitors invited Jones to preach at Laurel Street. Jones created a stir by bringing blacks to the service of the racially segregated church, but after his preaching and healing performance, a substantial segment of the Tabernacle voted with their feet, leaving their congregation to walk with Jones. Together, on 4 April 1955, they established Wings of Deliverance, the corporate vehicle of what was later named Peoples Temple.

In his ministry, Jones extended the always strong Pentecostalist ethic of a caring community toward racial integration, and he initiated urban ministry programs more typically associated with the social gospel of progressive middle-class Protestant denominations like the Methodists. Peoples Temple became a racially integrated self-help community of believers in practical service under the umbrella of a church. Out of this unlikely amalgamation of disparate ideas and practices, Jones gradually built the church into a communalistic social movement. Beginning as a somewhat unconventional preacher, he increasingly took on the mantle of a prophet who warned of an impending capitalist apocalypse and worked to establish a socialist promised land for those who heeded his message.

The movement grew up around the Jones family itself. Already by 1952 Jim and Marcie had adopted a ten-year-old girl. Then in 1955, they capitalized on Marcie's nursing experience, bringing an older follower to live in their own home, thereby establishing a nursing home under a formula whereby their ever-widening family could be supported in part by cash payments from outside. In the late 1950s the couple adopted children who had been orphaned by the Korean War, initiating what they would call their multi-ethnic "rainbow family." Two years after the birth of their natural son Stephan Gandhi Jones in 1959, the Joneses became the first white couple in Indianapolis, and perhaps in the state of Indiana, to adopt a black child. At the time, when the civil rights movement was just gaining steam in the

U.S., Jones remarked, "Integration is a more personal thing with me now. It's a question of my son's future."

For all the dynamism of Jones's early family-centered ministry, however, he was hardly original in developing strategies, practices, and organizational forms. Instead, Jones was something of a living syncretist sponge who could absorb ideas, people, and their energies from the most diverse sources into the development of his organization.

Most importantly, Jones connected to the legacy of blacks' search for redemption in the United States. Several times in the late 1950s, he visited the Philadelphia Peace Mission of the American black preacher Father M. J. Divine, who, in the 1920s and '30s, had established himself at the center of a racially integrated religious and economic community. Father Divine himself stood in a long tradition of "black messiahs" who promoted migration from the Old South Black Belt after the U.S. Civil War. The cultural sources are even deeper, going back to the time of slavery, and from it, to cultural memories drawn from the Bible. "The rhetoric of this migration" from the South, as James Diggs has noted, "was often reminiscent of antebellum Black nationalism, with its talk of escape from the land of bondage and quest for a promised land" (q. in Moses 1982, p. 135). Like the biblical Jews under Moses, nineteenth-century black ministers had sometimes portrayed the collective suffering of their people and their quest for redemption as part of a higher religious purpose to history. Collective migration could serve as a vehicle to this purpose, for example, in the departure of "exodusters" from the South to settle in Oklahoma and Kansas during the latter part of the nineteenth century. In the early twentieth century, Marcus Garvey took up the theme anew with his back-to-Africa movement (which never repatriated a single U.S. black to Africa while Garvey operated in the U.S.). And then there was Father Divine.

During the 1930s, he dabbled with the Communist Party, but more centrally, he relocated the destination of back-to-Africa dreams by setting up his peace missions in major Eastern U.S. cities and establishing "The Promised Land" — rural, interracial cooperative communities — in upstate New York (Weisbrot 1983).

Jim Jones borrowed much from the Peace Mission model (and stole away some of its members). Like Father Divine, he took to a patriarchal style of organization, with himself at the center, surrounded by a staff that included a heavy concentration of attractive, white women. Like Divine, Jones took to being called "Father," or sometimes, "Dad." Over the years, he would vacillate between operating an urban human service ministry akin to Divine's peace missions and establishing an exurban settlement in California not unlike the black messiah's upstate New York communities. But Jones's mission eventually took a more radical direction — emigration to escape the degradation of racism and class inequality in the United States. Again borrowing from Divine, the community that Peoples Temple founded in Guyana — Jonestown — would sometimes be called the Promised Land.

In the 1950s and '60s, Jones shaped Peoples Temple in Indianapolis as an extended family that offered the shelter of communal fellowship from an uncertain world beyond. Like Divine, Jones worked to develop Peoples Temple as an agent of social action — establishing care homes for the elderly, running a free restaurant to feed the hungary, and maintaining a social service center to help people get their lives back together. In time, the unconventional congregation attracted the notice of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), which had long been committed to a social ministry. By 1960, Peoples Temple had affiliated with the Disciples, and in 1964 Jones was officially ordained a minister.

Peoples Temple thrived in Indianapolis, but it also gained a certain

notoriety. Jones was more political than Father Divine, and he seemed to go out of his way to precipitate public controversies, seizing on opportunities to dramatize how racial segregation in Indianapolis extended even to its hospitals and its cemeteries. Indianapolis was not a progressive place, and bitter resistance to integration surfaced in some quarters. By publicly challenging segregationist policies beginning in the 1950s, Jones enhanced his own status as a civil-rights leader. Seeing the benefit of having reactionary opponents, he also sometimes staged incidents which made him, his family, and his church look like the targets of racist hate crimes. Nonetheless, some of the harassment was real, and Jones does not seem to have held up well under the pressure. In the face of the public tensions, his doctor hospitalized him for an ulcer during the fall of 1961. After his release, Jones began to seek a way out of Indianapolis. Leaving his congregation in the care of associate pastors, he and his family visited British Guiana (Guyana before independence from colonial rule), and then lived for two years in Brazil.

California Heyday

Even as Jones returned to Indianapolis in 1964, he already was laying the groundwork for a collective migration by his most committed followers. Tired of racial intolerance in Indiana and citing fears of nuclear holocaust, in the summer of 1965 they moved to the hamlet of Redwood Valley, near the quiet northern California town of Ukiah, in the Russian River valley. About seventy families, half white, half black, made the journey.

The congregation established itself slowly, counting only 168 adult members by 1968. Finally, in 1969 the Temple completed its own church building, enclosing a swimming pool they had previously built on the Joneses' land just

south of Redwood Valley. But Jim Jones failed to make much headway in drawing converts from the various apostolic fundamentalist congregations in the Ukiah area, and he became increasingly matter-of-fact in discussing secular socialism with his own congregation. He also pointedly criticized black ministers still promoting spiritualistic theologies of heavenly compensation for suffering after death, proposing to replace it with an alternative model — the activist church as social movement. On this platform Peoples Temple gradually attracted a wide range of people — working and middle-class blacks, hippies, socially concerned progressive professionals, fundamentalist Christians, former tenant farmers from the South, political activists and militants, street people, delinquents, and the elderly. These diverse sources fed an organization that began to grow rapidly. In the early 1970s, the Temple established a "human services" ministry of "care" homes for juveniles and the elderly, set up churches in San Francisco and Los Angeles, and began operating a fleet of buses to carry followers to church functions attended by thousands of people.

The Corporation of People

The care homes, like many other Temple enterprises, worked to the benefit of the organization in multiple ways. Like private-sector operators, the Temple was able to use care-payment income to leverage real estate investments that expanded the care-home operations and increased the property holdings of the organization. And it could also use the care homes to employ Temple members. In turn, because people were willing to work so hard for "the Cause," the homes produced substantial profits. The Temple treated these profits as organizational income rather than the income of individual operators, but it neglected to pay taxes, even though the

money would have been considered "unrelated business income" falling outside the "nonprofit religious organization" tax-exempt category of the Internal Revenue Service. Beyond the strictly financial benefits, the care-home operations became the nucleus for promoting a collective life and communal orientation more widely among followers. The people served by the care homes were more than clients; they participated as active members of the movement itself.

By its heyday in the mid-1970s, the Temple had established multiple streams of income, from petty church fundraisers and offerings at services, to a radio ministry, the care homes, and the salaries, social security checks, and real estate donated by members who "went communal." The money added up. After the mass suicide in 1978, a court-appointed receiver was able to consolidate $10 million of Temple assets, even though he couldn't recover all the defunct organization's holdings. Before the disastrous end, Jones had once said, "I have made the poor rich." But this isn't quite right. If the value of the receiver's Temple assets were allocated among the 913 members who died in Guyana, it would have come to around $12,000 per person, less if allocated among the total number of Temple members. The Temple thrived on the basis of expanding real-estate investments, a care-home business largely supported by state welfare payments, economies of scale of communal consumption, the labor of committed members supported by the group, and a whole host of evangelical fundraising techniques. But no one got rich. Effectively, Jones forged a collective organization that was wealthier than the sum of its individual parts.

Peoples Temple was devoted to some distinctly anti-establishment ends, but the success of the operation largely depended on disarmingly conventional means — from the petty fundraisers to corporate entrepreneurship, rationalized methods of administration that served a large membership, and active coordination with external

organizations such as welfare agencies and the Social Security Administration. On the whole, the Temple avoided the sorts of shady practices that sometimes have plagued both evangelical religious organizations and the care-home industry. Just as clearly, the group sometimes operated outside the law — certainly in failing to report care-home income, and perhaps in its transfers of assets to offshore bank accounts. Yet at least the quest for profits through tax avoidance and off-shore banking share an understandable rationale with more legitimate organizations that engage in similar practices.

The Collectivist Reformation

Where Peoples Temple deviated much more dramatically from conventional social practice was in its members' high rates of tithing, unsalaried labor, and donation of real and personal assets. In turn, these differences were part of a more profound difference — replacing individualism and the family unit with the communal equation of an organization that pooled the economic resources of its most highly committed members, and in return, offered them economic security, an extended collectivist "family," and the opportunity to participate in a politically meaningful social cause larger than themselves. Balancing that equation, the Temple demanded commitment, discipline, and individual submission to collective authority.

Of course, social control and the social monitoring required to prevent "freeriders" who fail to do their share are issues faced by all organizations of any significant size, from corporations, stores, schools, and monasteries, to mental hospitals, prisons, and armies (Hechter 1987). But in most organizations, procedures of monitoring and control tend to be legitimated by legal authority, contract, or long-established convention. By contrast, countercultural communal

organizations face more formidable issues of control, because they are quasi-familial yet voluntary groups with much weaker capacities to claim authority over their members.

Historically, the most successful communal groups have promoted solidarity and commitment through practices such as wearing uniforms, sharing a communal table, regulating sexual relationships, and monitoring members' behavior through techniques such as confession (Kanter 1972). Among the wide variety of communal groups, ones with apocalyptic orientations have a particularly strong basis to legitimate their demands for members' commitment, for they frame their existence in relation to a society at large construed as the embodiment of evil (Hall 1988). In such sects, the "end of the world" is taken as a central tenet. But the content of collective demands on members depends on how the apocalyptic group construes its position in relation to the end times. As we saw in the introduction, a key issue concerns whether the group locates itself before or after the end of the current epoch. Before the dawn of the new era, a highly solidary pre-apocalyptic "warring sect" will pursue the battle of Armageddon — that last and decisive struggle between the forces of good and evil. On the other hand, a post-apocalyptic "other-worldly sect" detaches from the evil society held to be in its last days, retreating to an isolated heaven-on-earth where the time of this world is treated as part of the past (Hall 1978).

In these terms, Jim Jones sometimes invoked other-worldly images of Peoples Temple as an ark of survival, but during its California years the Temple had higher stakes of commitment than the typical other-worldly sect, first, because it operated in urban and small-town settings where control was not enhanced by physical isolation, and second, because religious rhetoric masked a supposedly secret political antagonism toward the established order signaled by the Temple's

posture of alignment with political communism. Thus, an odd juxtaposition emerged: Peoples Temple developed its regime of social control within the framework of an organization that had the external appearance of a conventional church. But internally, control increasingly operated in ways more often found in militant political movements and clandestine warring sects.

Authority ultimately derived from the careful legitimation of Jim Jones's proclaimed charismatic mission as a socialist prophet. In practical terms, he enhanced his position by staging demonstrations of his paranormal powers and cultivating a network of personal relationships that was sometimes tinged with sexual domination of both women and men. Jim Jones was bisexual, and sex became something like a currency that he used, supposedly, "for the cause." With it, Jones gave some people intimacy, and controlled or humiliated others. The first offspring of his sexual unions was Stephan, the child born in Indiana in 1959 to Jones's legal wife Marcie. In California, Jones fathered Carolyn Layton's son Kimo Prokes, and he was widely believed to be the father of John Victor Stoen, born in 1972 to Grace Stoen, wife of Temple attorney Tim Stoen.

Beyond social control based on personal relationships and charismatic projection, the Temple adopted practices derived from wider cultural sources — (1) pseudo-Pentecostalist practices of "discernment" that Jones transformed into a vehicle of intelligence gathering used by Temple staff to monitor members, (2) a military-drill security unit like those found more widely in black American culture of the day, (3) techniques derived from the 1970s social-work and counselling psychology culture of California, and (4) a fundamentalist Christian ethic of punishment for wrongdoing. These practices helped sustain collective authority that was legitimated in an even more fundamental way by distributing relatively equal benefits of group life widely. In turn, by giving the broad base of participants a

stake in the organization, Peoples Temple created a broad interest in maintaining social control (cf. Hall 1988). The leadership was able to consolidate a pervasive apparatus of monitoring in which rank-and-file participants provided information on their own and others' personal problems, sexual conduct, social relationships, degree of commitment to the Temple, and deviant or criminal activities. In turn, Temple staff used this information for collective intervention in individuals' lives and their social relationships. They conducted individual and group counselling sessions, and they held public meetings for "catharsis," where Jim Jones sometimes publicly humiliated backsliders and asked the assembled populace to determine punishments that included paddlings and boxing matches for wrongdoers. The assembled collective itself participated in the practices that sustained organizational authority.

Many of the Temple techniques of monitoring, counselling, and social control, it borrowed from the wider society. But there was a critical difference: however pervasive the webs of social control in society at large, they do not become consolidated in a single apparatus. Peoples Temple, on the other hand, amalgamated control in the hierarchy of a total institution that enveloped its participants in a single web of surveillance, even though many Temple members freely participated in the wider world through school and jobs. As in any social order, the burden of this regime fell more heavily on the less committed than on loyal members who followed the rules. From inside the Temple, monitoring, catharsis sessions, and physical punishment seemed necessary to maintain standards of acceptable conduct and prevent internal dissension from taking hold. But from outside, all this came to be viewed as manipulation, physical abuse, and brainwashing.

Politics and Public Relations

Social control in the Temple gained a special edge through its connection to the group's disciplined struggle against injustice in the wider society. Compared to both conventional churches and retreatist communal groups of its day, Peoples Temple was an anomaly — a highly organized radical religious collective that pursued an activist politics within the society at large. Perversely, the Temple used textbook public-relations (or P.R.) techniques to protect an apocalyptic socialist movement opposed to the very capitalist society where practices of public relations had originated.

In the political climate of California during the 1970s, shaped by the counterculture and the anti-Vietnam war movement, the Temple used P.R. strategies within a broad political coalition committed to racial integration, social and economic justice, peace, and other progressive and radical causes. Because of its discipline, the Temple could turn out the troops. Members rallied against the Bakke decision by the California Supreme Court when it outlawed a University of California affirmative-action procedure. They joined a coalition denouncing apartheid in South Africa. Temple staff met with the Jewish Community Relations Council about combating the increase in Nazi propaganda in the Bay area. And the Temple supported gay rights, depicting the anti-gay stances of advertising celebrity Anita Bryant as "giving birth to a new wave of fascism..., spreading its poison in attacking anything that's not straight, white and conservative."

More concretely, the Temple provided a ready supply of political workers to the Democratic Party. By 1975 Peoples Temple was sufficiently adept at conventional party politics that the group became a formidable force in the left-liberal political surge that propelled democrat George Moscone into office as mayor

of San Francisco. A year later the Temple reaped the political rewards. Temple attorney Tim Stoen was called from his position as assistant district attorney in Mendocino Country to prosecute voter fraud for the San Francisco district attorney, and Mayor Moscone appointed Jim Jones to the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission. At the end of the year, the San Francisco Chronicle quoted Jones as favoring "some kind of democratic socialism."

The Attractions of the Temple

By any standard, Peoples Temple was a deviant organization in American society. Its spartan regimen of social control depended on practices of humiliation and emotional and physical abuse abhorrent to norms of mainstream American culture. Yet the dubious practices of Peoples Temple don't seem sufficient to explain the solidarity of its members. They thus beg the question of how the organization was able to thrive and grow. What was it about Peoples Temple that attracted tens of thousands to its services and led to the active participation of over one thousand people?

In part, the group's success was the consequence of the ways it exploited conventional pathways of action in the wider society. The Temple operated as a church, and drew on the legitimacy of churches. Its staff became accomplished at organizational coordination, public relations, and political stratagems that largely mimicked conventional practices. And like other organizations, public and private, they channeled resources from the state welfare system into the material benefits that the Temple offered.

Yet these conventional features and benefits came in an alien utopian package that presumably would have put people off, had they not been willing to

embrace a radical alternative to their previous life circumstances. Peoples Temple differed dramatically from conventional organizations in the wider society, including the vast majority of its religious organizations. It was first and foremost a highly unusual testament to an alternative mode of ethnic relations — a racially integrated community of people who lived daily life together. In a striking way, the Temple also reconfigured the various available missions of the local church as a social institution (cf. Becker 1999) by radicalizing the social gospel through a congregational communal formula of "apostolic socialism" and direct social ministry, combined with a leftist political agenda in the wider society. This model attracted people from many stations in society — even secular political leftists who might have been expected to take the view of Karl Marx and Frederich Engels in the Communist Manifesto that "social Utopias" amount to "castles in the air."

However, if Peoples Temple was atypical as a religious congregation, it was hardly the typical social utopia either. Most communitarian groups that developed "worldly utopian" alternative models of society — New Harmony in Indiana during the nineteenth century, the Farm in Tennessee during the American countercultural wave of the 1960s and '70s — did so at some remove from the society-at-large (Hall 1978). On the other hand, during its California heyday, Peoples Temple became an unusual hybrid — an urban-based, relatively autonomous communalistic organization, nevertheless complexly connected to the wider society, and to the state, corporate, political, and media institutions of that society. By contrast with worldly utopian communal groups, Peoples Temple developed what may be called a "collectivist bureaucracy." Through their joint efforts, Temple staff organized the lives of everyday members in a way fully articulated with the complex governmental and capitalist order around them. Yet by this collective enterprise, the Temple increased the autonomy of its individual

members from that external order, giving them time and direction to channel their energies in politically activist directions.

No one should gainsay the reprehensible features of Peoples Temple public relations, politics, and social control. Yet rejection of the reprehensible should be accompanied by recognition that the Temple's practices — both ones widely regarded as legitimate and other more questionable ones — are hardly foreign to the wider world. Nor should we deny the organization's appeal during its California years. Peoples Temple was distinctive in its capacity to chart a pathway of expansion within the wider society under the auspices of a utopian vision and innovative form of social organization that harnessed the energies of many people of good will. From multiple walks of life, its members came together in a community that transcended the operative institutions, cultural boundaries, and social divisions of the existing social order.

Gone to the Promised Land

The organizational and political successes of Peoples Temple by the mid-1970s give cause to wonder why Jim Jones did not move directly into the realm of politics, as other activist leaders of religious social movements have done. But the question is moot because the Temple became embroiled in controversy, and migrated en masse to Guyana. Indeed, these developments reveal the precarious nature of Peoples Temple's political successes, for those successes depended on the public-relations facade that hid the Temple's more radical and dubious aspects from the wider society.

Within the shell of a church, Jones called his followers to what Max Weber called an "ethic of ultimate ends." He sought to recruit highly committed

individuals, and he insisted that followers pursue the cause of Peoples Temple selflessly, tirelessly, and without compromise. It is a measure of the total commitment Jones demanded that he invoked a doctrine originally developed by Black Panther Party member Huey Newton, namely, that the slow suicide of life in the ghetto ought to be displaced by "revolutionary suicide." The life of the committed revolutionary would end only in victory against economic, social, and racial injustice, or death. In keeping with this thesis, the Temple expected Jones's followers to give up their previous lives and became born again to a collective struggle that had no limits. This radical ethos both deepened the gulf between Peoples Temple and the wider society, and served as the ideological point of departure for the uncompromising posture that the Temple developed during its protracted conflict with increasingly organized apostates and their allies, who became equally committed to their own cause of opposition.

Forging a regime of militant activism, Jones cultivated the very "persecution" that he both feared and prophesied. Eventually, the Temple leadership uncovered information which, they thought, confirmed Jones's dire prophecies that the group would not be able to survive in the United States. Jones and over a thousand followers thereupon undertook a collective emigration to Guyana, leaving the path of militant political struggle within the United States behind.

While Peoples Temple remained in the United States, it operated <u>in</u> the world. Yet Jones never expected acceptance <u>from</u> the world. In Indianapolis, he promised followers that the Temple would protect them from a hostile outside world, yet he also projected the belief that his racially integrated congregation would have to leave their present surroundings. Like Moses and the ancient Jews searching for a land of "milk and honey" or the Puritans who fled to North America from religious persecution in England to found a "city on a hill," Jones sought

redemption for his followers in collective religious migration to a promised land — by leading his congregation to California. But there, Jones's promised land soon took a new form — the creation of a sanctuary outside the United States itself. Beginning in 1972 and 1973, Jones used internal defections and small incidents of external "persecution" in California as the warrant to establish Peoples Temple's "Promised Land" — an "agricultural mission" eventually called Jonestown — in a remote corner of Guyana, an ethnically diverse, socialist-governed country on the northern, Caribbean, coast of South American.

At its inception, Jonestown was just a pioneer camp. But even before the site was established in early 1974, a memo by Temple attorney Tim Stoen suggested that the Temple should methodically prepare for collective migration from the U.S. by consolidating its finances and other affairs. The plan was to remain in California "until first signs of outright persecution from press or government," then "start moving all members to mission post." In practice, the Temple followed the basic thrust of this plan. The initial party of settlers devoted most of their efforts toward construction of enough housing and other facilities to accommodate a large influx of settlers, while Temple operatives in Guyana's capital of Georgetown used their public relations and political skills (and sexual allure) to establish secure political alliances with members of the patrimonial socialist regime of the country's black prime minister, Forbes Burnham.

Jonestown remained a small outpost until Peoples Temple undertook the collective migration of some 1,000 people during the summer of 1977. But unlike the mid-1960s migration to California to escape Hoosier racism, Jones did not justify this migration solely on the basis of his personal perceptions about a hostile environment. The migration unfolded as a move in an escalating conflict between Peoples Temple and an emerging coalition of external opponents.

Over the years, members occasionally had left Peoples Temple, but they had never actively turned against the organization. A handful of outside critics of the Temple, who questioned Jones's faith healing and other unusual practices, remained relatively isolated. But this all changed toward the end of 1975, when Deanna and "Mert" Mertle, two high-ranking members of the Temple leadership, departed, leaving a series of unresolved conflicts in their wake, including a dispute over an unrecorded deed to a property that the couple had signed over to the Temple. In February 1976, the Mertles changed their names to Al and Jeannie Mills, symbolizing that they were new people now that they had left the Temple. Eventually, the Mertles/Millses made contact with others who were leaving the Temple. Among them was Grace Stoen, who in July 1976 drove from Redwood Valley to Lake Tahoe with a Temple bus mechanic, Walter "Smitty" Jones, leaving behind her husband, Temple attorney Tim Stoen, and her son, four-year-old John Victor Stoen.

By the fall of 1976 a handful of these apostates coalesced into a small group, and the Mills's teenaged daughter Linda decided to follow the rest of her family out of the Temple. Linda's exit reduced the issues of contention between the Millses and the Temple and strengthened the family's separation from the group. At the time, there was a wider tide of public concern about "cults" like Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church and the Hare Krishnas (Shupe, Bromley, and Oliver 1984). In this climate the reunited Mills family began to see Peoples Temple as a cult. They followed the public controversies about families seeking court-ordered conservatorships for custody over relatives lost to strange messiahs, and they gravitated toward the centerpiece of anticult movement activism — the "coercive persuasion" explanation of conversion and commitment. As one Mills daughter explained to her sister, "We were all brainwashed in there, Linda. The one thing we

have learned is not to blame ourselves for the things Jim made us do."

But the apostates did not simply reinterpret their own experiences and actions. They sought to bring the Temple to a public accounting. David Conn, a long-time critic of the Temple and a confident of the opponents who had come together around the Mertles/Millses and Grace Stoen, brokered the crucial contact. In early 1977, Conn put the apostates in touch with his daughter's boyfriend, George Kleinman, a reporter for the Santa Rosa Press–Democrat. In turn, George Kleinman put the opponents in touch with a Customs Service agent in the U.S. Treasury Department. The agent met with thirteen Temple opponents, and assured them that a full-scale investigatory effort would be directed at Peoples Temple, involving all levels of government.

Around the same time, journalists for conservative media magnate Rupert Murdock's New West magazine decided to write a story on Peoples Temple because of political efforts to unseat a political patron of Jones and the Temple — liberal San Francisco mayor George Moscone. Initially, the New West reporters didn't know about the apostates, and they didn't have any viable source of information about life inside Peoples Temple. Lacking sources, in June 1977 they got the San Francisco Chronicle to publish a story about how the Temple was trying to suppress the story they were working on. By this "ploy," as one of the reporters called it, they managed to hook up with the defectors. Thus gaining inside information, New West published an exposé series which generated a flood of negative newspaper accounts, beginning in July 1977, just weeks before the election vote over whether to recall Mayor Moscone. The opponents appeared in these stories as apostates and relatives courageous enough to expose the group, despite their fear of reprisals. The narratives overwhelmingly depicted Peoples Temple through an anticult lens that raised questions about supposed financial

ripoffs, extravagant living, and hair-raising practices of psychological catharsis, physical punishment, and brainwashing.

At the time of the exposés, Peoples Temple had already initiated the collective migration to Guyana, and it was widely believed that they had done so in anticipation of the New West story. But the exodus had a more complex genesis in Temple concerns during early 1976 about an alignment that they perceived emerging among former members, reporters, and the federal government.

In the years of preparing for a migration to Guyana, the Temple had gone to considerable lengths to keep "black people's money" out of the hands of the U.S. Internal Revenue Service. By the standards of poor people, they had created substantial collective wealth. Beyond maintaining Peoples Temple in California, the Temple used the resources to finance Jonestown and to prepare for a possible migration. To pursue these activities they shifted millions of dollars into overseas bank accounts — beyond the reach of authorities in the United States. In 1976, the Temple leadership took steps to resolve its tax situation with the IRS by applying for tax-exempt status as a religious communal group. However, as the year wore on, they became increasingly worried that their tax-exempt application itself had inadvertently triggered an IRS investigation into their care-home financial practices, political involvements, and what the government might deem "private benefits" that the group provided to its communal members. Then in early March, 1977, the IRS notified the Temple that their application for tax-exempt status had been turned down.

Soon thereafter, and well before the inside sources met with New West reporters, David Conn, the confidant of the Temple opponents, did something that had the unintentional consequence of heightening the Temple's longstanding concerns about its tax status. In late March, Conn met with American Indian

Movement (AIM) leader Dennis Banks, whom Conn hoped to warn about the hidden side of Peoples Temple. But unbeknownst to Conn, Jim Jones had loaned Banks $19,000 to bail his wife out of prison, and Banks was a close and indebted Temple ally. At the meeting with Banks, Conn revealed a great deal about what he knew of the Temple — the defectors' stories of faked healings, beatings, property extortion, threats, and intimidations, the fact that he was working with a reporter, and the existence of the U.S. Treasury investigation initiated through the contact between opponents and the Customs Service agent that reporter George Kleinman had brokered. When Dennis Banks passed on what David Conn had told him to the Temple leadership, they mistakenly took their opponents' "treasury agent" (that is, the Customs Service agent) to be connected with the Temple's tax situation. Faced with what they regarded as a serious governmental threat to their organization, Temple leaders launched urgent final preparations for mass departure to Guyana. In the glare of the media spotlight, the collective migration began in earnest in July of 1977. By September, the population of Jonestown had mushroomed to around a thousand people, around 70% blacks, 30% whites. A steady trickle of immigrants continued to arrive through October of 1978.

THE CONCERNED RELATIVES AND THE "CONCENTRATION CAMP"

There is no way of knowing how Jonestown would have developed as a communal settlement in the absence of the increasingly polarized conflict with its opponents. The migration to Guyana did not cut the Temple off from controversy; it simply shifted the dynamics of the struggle. The opponents continued to offer reporters revelations about the Temple and they fed information about "nefarious acts" to government authorities — from the San Francisco Police Department to the

Customs Bureau and the Federal Communications Commission. But their central concern was the fate of Jonestown's residents.

The flood of negative press stories that accompanied the collective migration to Jonestown during the summer of 1977 heightened the anxieties of Jones's opponents and stirred concerns among relatives who might otherwise have been less involved. The strangest and most notorious case concerned the "child god" — John Victor Stoen. Legally he was the son of defector Grace Stoen and her husband, Temple attorney Tim Stoen. But Jim Jones claimed that he was the biological father of John Stoen, and the boy was indeed raised socially within Peoples Temple as the son of Jim Jones. Three months after Grace had set off with Smitty Jones in July 1976, Tim Stoen, John's legal father, signed a notarized power of attorney for his son, appointing Jim Jones and others "to take all steps, exercise all powers and rights, that I might do in connection with said minor." The four-and-a-half-year-old was trundled off to Guyana, to live at the agricultural community. But in time Grace Stoen came to recognize that her abandonment of John Victor Stoen to an identity within a collective organization contradicted basic social mores in the wider society that she had rejoined, and in February 1977, she began to assert her interest in getting the child to come back and live in San Francisco. The Temple response? The legal father, Tim Stoen, would go to Guyana to live with John. If Grace decided to press the issue, surely the Guyanese courts would side with the resident parent. Soon thereafter, Grace went to court to file for divorce and custody.

The resulting struggle became the most celebrated among a series of contestations that eventually raised the question of whether adults at Jonestown lived there of their own free will. The conflict intensified in the summer of 1977, when Tim Stoen went over to the camp of Temple opponents. After a California

court granted custody to Grace Stoen on August 26, her lawyer travelled to Guyana. When people at Jonestown refused to hand over John Stoen, the lawyer went to the Guyanese courts and obtained an arrest order for the child and a court summons for Jim Jones. Jones learned of these court actions on 10 September, and he responded with a dramaturgical state of siege in Jonestown. Reaffirming his biological paternity of John Stoen, he threatened death: "I related to Grace, and out of that came a son. That's part of the deal. The way to get to Jim Jones is through his son. They think that will suck me back or cause me to die before I'll give him up. And that's what we'll do, we'll die." Jones's staging of the crisis was by all accounts intense, but it quickly abated: through intensive political and legal maneuvering, Temple staff managed to vacate the Guyanese court order by successfully arguing that Grace Stoen had never revoked a standing grant of custody to a Temple member living at Jonestown.

The Stoen custody battle was a particularly complex case that brought to the fore basic legal and social issues surrounding communal versus conventional societal definitions of parenthood and family. But this was not the only custody struggle, nor were custody struggles the only frontiers of conflict engulfing Peoples Temple. The increasingly organized network of opponents grew in numbers and activities. Participants initiated court proceedings both in the U.S. and Guyana to seek legal custody of other Jonestown children than John Stoen, and they made "welfare and whereabouts" requests for the U.S. State Department to have its embassy in Guyana check on their relatives in Jonestown. One distraught father embarked on a desperate and ineffective scheme to kidnap his adult daughter from Jonestown. Once Tim Stoen came over to their side, the opponents began to use political pressure and public relations — the same methods that Peoples Temple had employed so effectively in the United States. Calling themselves the "Concerned

Relatives," they launched a highly visible campaign against Peoples Temple: they wrote to members of Congress, they met with State Department officials, and they organized human rights demonstrations.

Despite the intensity of the Concerned Relatives' manifold efforts, they were largely unsuccessful. The Stoen custody case became bogged down in legal issues in the Guyana courts, and the U.S. State Department insisted on due process, refusing to take sides in a matter still proceeding through the courts of a foreign country. On other fronts, multiple governmental investigations in the U.S. failed to come up with significant prosecutable offenses. And when U.S. embassy officials in Guyana checked up on the "welfare and whereabouts" of Jonestown residents for their relatives, they found people living an austere third-world lifestyle who nevertheless "expressed satisfaction with their lives," as one embassy consul reported after a visit to the jungle community. In the absence of evidence that supported the opponents' charges of mass starvation and people living in bondage, the consul later observed, "The Concerned Relatives had a credibility problem, since so many of their claims were untrue" (Hall 1987, p. 217, 234).

Overall, the campaign against Peoples Temple backfired. But the meager results on legal and governmental fronts did have an important consequence: the frustrated opponents sought other avenues of remedy. Increasingly, they amplified and generalized their public charges against Peoples Temple.

In turn, even though the opponents failed in their direct goals, the Jonestown leadership took the campaign of opposition as inspiration for an increasingly apocalyptic posture, reinforcing the siege mentality that had started to take hold within the community during the September 1977 custody crisis over John Stoen. Most ominously, they began to elaborate the concept of "revolutionary suicide" that Jones had borrowed years earlier from Black Panther leader Huey

Newton. The writer of a March 1978, Temple letter to members of Congress warned, "I can say without hesitation that we are devoted to a decision that it is better even to die than to be constantly harassed from one continent to the next. I hope that you can protect the right of over 1,000 people from the U.S. to live in peace." A woman who defected from Jonestown in May of the same year, Debbie Blakey, told an embassy official and the Concerned Relatives that Jonestown was developing plans to carry out a mass suicide, murdering any resisters. In turn, the Concerned Relatives repeatedly publicized the Temple's diehard threats of death and suicide as a way of raising the alarm against Jonestown. "When you say you are 'devoted' to this decision," they asked rhetorically, "does that mean it is irreversible?" (Hall 1987, p. 229).

In a public petition, the Concerned Relatives also portrayed Peoples Temple as "employing physical intimidation and psychological coercion as part of a mind-programming campaign" in violation of the United Nations human-rights declaration of 1948 (Hall 1987, p. 229). This petition effectively raised new issues about Jonestown. Legally, adults at the jungle community had the legal right to avoid contact with their relatives if they so chose. However, if their mail was censored, if they were intimidated, if they couldn't travel, then it could be argued that they had neither free will nor free access to the outside world. In the words of one of the Concerned Relatives, the residents of Jonestown had become "mind-programmed." By small steps, the struggles by the Concerned Relatives to gain custody over particular children and access to particular relatives became refocussed into an effort to "dismantle" what they eventually portrayed as a "concentration camp" (Hall 1987, pp. 232–33). The Concerned Relatives demanded nothing less than that Jonestown cease to exist as a bounded communal society. In effect, they bet that they could bring Jonestown to a public reckoning without precipitating the

extreme acts of violent resistance that the community had threatened. On the other side, the leadership of Peoples Temple would want to know what were the prospects for people who had staked their lives on emigration to a foreign country thousands of miles from California, only to find their opponents hell-bent on shutting down the community they had sacrificed so much to build. Contradictory fears and postures fed the conflict over whether Jonestown was to survive.

Frustrated in both their legal efforts and their attempts to get the U.S. State Department and its embassy to take their side in the tangle of disputes, yet propelled by the belief that Jim Jones had to be stopped, the Concerned Relatives increasingly pinned their hopes on political intervention. In Washington, D.C., they already had attracted the support of Leo Ryan, a U.S. congressman from San Mateo, California, known to be sympathetic to the U.S. anticult movement. In December 1977, Congressman Ryan wrote U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, asking him "to investigate what action might be taken in connection with Mr. Jones." The State Department responded by describing the situation as a legal controversy that did not warrant any "political action without justification." Ryan rejected this view. In May of 1978, as the Concerned Relatives became increasingly frustrated with their lack of success in the courts and with the State Department, Ryan wrote to Peoples Temple, "Please be advised that Tim Stoen does have my support in the effort to return his son from Guyana." Then he began to work with members of the Concerned Relatives to organize a visit to Jonestown.

MISSION TO JONESTOWN

The expedition that Leo Ryan led to Jonestown was publicly billed as the "fact-finding effort" of a congressional delegation, but this public facade obscured a

working alliance between Ryan and the Concerned Relatives. As preparations unfolded, no other congressman would join Ryan on the trip, and for this reason the expedition failed to meet congressional criteria as an official congressional delegation. Another California congressman, Don Edwards, advised that taking the trip under such conditions "was not the right thing to do." Edwards later recalled, "I said congressmen are ill-advised to take such matters into their own hands." But Ryan pressed ahead anyway, accompanied unofficially by a number of Concerned Relatives and some journalists.

Diverse motives shaped the planned trip. At least two opponents, Tim Stoen and Steve Katsaris, wanted to retrieve their relatives "by force if necessary," as Stoen put it. A less clandestine strategy hinged on the view of some opponents that conditions at Jonestown were desperate. In this scenario, the presence of visiting relatives together with outside authorities would break Jones's discipline and precipitate a mass exodus. The press had agendas too. A soldier-of-fortune journalist, Don Harris, organized an NBC crew to cover a story about a congressman and ordinary citizens travelling to Guyana to investigate the plight of their relatives trapped in a jungle commune.

Given the participation of a congressman and the newsmen, the expedition promised to confront Jones with the choice of either submitting to external scrutiny and possible intervention, or precipitating a flood of bad press and governmental inquiry. When Peoples Temple staff first learned of Ryan's plans, they sought to negotiate conditions about press coverage and the composition of the congressional delegation. But Ryan considered the negotiations a delaying tactic, and on 14 November 1978, accompanied by the group of Concerned Relatives and the news reporters, he boarded the Pan American Airlines flight from New York to Guyana's capital, Georgetown. The group would try to gain access to Jonestown once they

arrived. But in Georgetown, Ryan met further resistance. With time running out before he would have to return to the U.S., on 17 November, he flew with the reporters and a subgroup of the Concerned Relatives to Port Kaituma, a small settlement near Jonestown. From there, a dump truck brought Ryan, the U.S. ambassador to Guyana, and Temple lawyers Charles Garry and Mark Lane up the muddy road to Jonestown, where they conferred with Jim Jones. Faced with the prospects of news reports about a congressman and relatives barred from entering a jungle compound that had been called a concentration camp, Jones acquiesced to the visit of the Concerned Relatives and most of the journalists.

At Jonestown, Jim Jones already had coached his community for days about how to respond to the visitors. On the evening that Ryan and the others arrived, Jonestown gave them an orchestrated welcome at the main pavilion, serving up a good dinner and musical entertainment from "The Jonestown Express." But during the festivities, a message was passed to NBC reporter Don Harris: "Help us get out of Jonestown." The note was signed "Vern Gosney." On the reverse side was the name "Monica Bagby." The next day, Jonestown staff tried to occupy the visitors with public-relations activities. But Ryan and embassy staff began to make arrangements for Gosney and Bagby to leave. NBC reporter Don Harris then tipped off Leo Ryan's assistant, Jackie Speier, about members of the Parks family, who also might want to leave. Jones pleaded with the Parks family not to depart with his enemies; he offered them $5,000 to cover transportation back to the U.S. if they would wait several days and go on their own. But they decided to leave with Ryan. "I have failed," Jones muttered to his lawyer, Charles Garry. "I live for my people because they need me. But whenever they leave, they tell lies about the place."

As the dump truck was loaded for departure, Ryan told Jones that he would

give a basically positive report: "If two hundred people wanted to leave, I would still say you have a beautiful place here." Ryan talked about the need for more interchange with the outside world. Suddenly he was assaulted by a man brandishing a knife. Blood spurted across Ryan's white shirt. Within seconds, Temple attorneys Charles Garry and Mark Lane grabbed the assailant, a man named Don Sly, the former husband of a Concerned Relative. Jones stood impassively by. Ryan was disheveled but unhurt: Sly had accidentally cut himself, not the congressman.

"Does this change everything?" Jones asked Ryan. "It doesn't change everything, but it changes things," Ryan replied. "You get that man arrested." Then the U.S. embassy deputy chief of mission, Richard Dwyer, led Ryan to the departing truck, and they piled in with the reporters, the four Concerned Relatives, and the Jonestown people who had decided to leave with the entourage. The truck lurched into low gear and down the muddy road toward the nearby Port Kaituma airstrip.

Gone From the Promised Land

All told, sixteen defectors, mostly whites, departed under the auspices of a U.S. congressman whom the Jonestown leadership regarded as allied with their opponents. One of the apostates parted saying that the community was nothing but "a Communist prison camp." From Jones's viewpoint, the episode was certain to be used by the Temple's opponents to fuel further accusations, more media scrutiny, and increased intervention in the affairs of Jonestown by external legal authorities. These were the circumstances in which the Jonestown leadership translated revolutionary suicide into a final decisive act against their opponents,

sending sharpshooters to the airstrip in pursuit of the dumptruck.

When the truck reached the Port Kaituma airstrip and Ryan's group started boarding two planes, a Jonestown man posing as a defector suddenly pulled out a loaded pistol in the smaller plane and fired it. Simultaneously, a tractor came up pulling a flatbed trailer carrying men from Jonestown. When the trailer had pulled to about thirty feet from the larger plane, as if by signal, the men picked up rifles and started shooting at the people still clustered outside the plane. After a seeming eternity of gunfire, the tractor pulled away, leaving behind ten people wounded, and five dead bodies — Congressman Leo Ryan, NBC reporter Don Harris, two other newsmen, and defector Patricia Parks.

By directing the airstrip attack on Leo Ryan and his entourage, Jones and his followers constructed a situation of such overriding stigma that their enemies surely would prevail in their plan to "dismantle" Jonestown. But the Jonestown leadership chose to finesse this outcome. Back at the pavilion, Jim Jones told the assembled residents of Jonestown that they would no longer be able to survive as a community. With a tape recorder running, Jones argued, "If we can't live in peace, then let's die in peace." Medical staff set up cauldrons of Fla-Vor Aid laced with cyanide and tranquilizers.

913 members of the community became caught up in the orchestrated ritual of mass suicide that ensued. How many people willingly participated? The question will always be open to debate. Certainly young children could not have understood the consequences of drinking the poison, and during the suicide council, a woman named Christine Miller pleaded against Jones's proposal. But many people supported the plan — mothers willing to have their infants killed, elderly people telling Jones they were ready to go, the sharpshooters who had killed the congressman. Amidst low wails, sobbing, and the shrieks of children, they all

came up to take the "potion," then moved out of the pavilion to huddle with their families and die. Whatever their individual sentiments, the people of Jonestown departed their own promised land through an improvised ritual of collective death. As people lined up to die, Jones preached to the believers and the doubters assembled in the Jonestown pavilion. Invoking Huey Newton's words, he assured them, "This is a revolutionary suicide. This is not a self-destructive suicide." In the confusion, two black men slipped past the guards. At the very end, Jim Jones and a close aide, Annie Moore, died by gunshots to the head, wounds consistent with suicide. Annie had scribbled a last sentence to the note she left: "We died because you would not let us live in peace." During the mass suicide, the community's two American lawyers, Charles Garry and Mark Lane, had been sequestered at a perimeter house, and after their guards left to join the suicide ritual, Garry and Lane plunged into the jungle. One elderly woman slept through the event. Everyone else died.

AFTER JONESTOWN

What is the cultural significance of Jonestown? The answer to this question hinges on highly contested questions about why the mass suicide occurred. With a basic narrative of the group's history at hand, we can consider these questions. A general list of necessary preconditions — without which the murderous attack against enemies and mass self-destruction would not have occurred — might reasonably focus on the internal features of a group that could undertake such acts, specifically: (1) a charismatic religious social movement with (2) an apocalyptic ideology, (3) a form of social organization adequate to maintain solidarity, with (4) legitimacy enough among followers to exercise collective social control over the affairs of the

community, and (5) sufficient economic and political viability to (6) live within strong social boundaries in cognitive isolation from society-at-large. Without these circumstances, minor incidents of violence might occur within a countercultural communal movement or in a conflict between it and external adversaries, but it is difficult to imagine that they would trigger violence on a large scale.

These preconditions well describe Peoples Temple. Yet if the preconditions are particularly conducive to violence, they are hardly sufficient. Numerous apocalyptic and quasi-apocalyptic religious communities — from Mother Ann Lee's Shakers to contemporary "heavens on earth" like Seattle's Love Family and the Krishna farm in West Virginia (Hall 1978) — have all these internal characteristics without experiencing anything remotely like murder of enemies followed by collective suicide. Thus, strongly bounded apocalyptic religious movements may be especially prone to external violence and mass suicide, but that outcome is extremely rare compared to the number of groups adequately described by the list of preconditions. There must be specific additional precipitating factors that would result in murders and mass suicide.

In contemporary circumstances, the necessary precipitating factors would seem to be the ones described in the model of apocalyptic religious conflict described in the introduction: (1) the mobilization of a solidary group of cultural opponents, (2) the shaping of news media coverage through the cultural opponents' frame of interpretation about "cults," (3) the exercise of state authority. If through the operation of these factors, the apocalyptic group's very capacity to persist comes into question, it would be under these conditions (and in a strong explanation, these conditions alone) that group leaders might unleash aggression toward detractors and use the device of mass suicide to cut off any external exercise of authority over the group.

How well does this general causal explanation capture the circumstances that led up to the murders and mass suicide at Jonestown? Clearly, the proximate cause of murder and mass suicide was the refusal of Jim Jones, his staff, and the loyalists among his followers to brook compromise with opponents whom they believed (with some basis) were out to bring Jonestown as a community to an end. Rather than submit to external powers that they regarded as illegitimate, they chose to stage the airstrip murders as revenge and shut out their opponents by ending their own lives.

After the fact, the narrative structure of myth carved the stigma of this massive carnage into infamy. Jones became a megalomaniacal Antichrist; Peoples Temple, a cult of brainwashed robots; the Concerned Relatives, tragic heros who valiantly tried but failed to save their loved ones. However, the mythic structure of this narrative depends on a particular analytic claim — that the avoidable carnage was solely a consequence of the acts of Jones and his accomplices. It is by lifting the mantle on this very claim that we come to the heart of the apocalypse at Jonestown.

Absent the airstrip attack on Ryan and the others, the mass suicide would have lacked a credible rationale, whereas in the context of the airstrip murders, Jones presented collective death as the only honorable collective choice in the face of certain subjugation to external authority. In other words, the Jonestown leadership constructed the murders and mass suicide as a unity, but that unity was predicated upon the airstrip attack. The attack itself was hardly an act of random violence: other than the perhaps accidental killing of a young girl who defected, the gunfire seems to have been carefully targeted toward individuals whom Jonestown principals regarded as their opponents in the ongoing struggle. It was a preemptive strike that snatched victory from opponents, albeit by fulfilling their most

nightmarish prophecies.

Given the targets, the attack itself has to be understood as an extreme escalation of an intense conflict between the Concerned Relatives and Peoples Temple. This conflict already had already unfolded for more than a year in the press, the courts, the U.S. State Department, in the conduct of espionage on both sides, and in strategic actions that had previously come close to direct confrontation. Under these circumstances, it seems incontrovertible that the expedition of Congressman Ryan, the Concerned Relatives, and journalists, and especially their departure with sixteen Jonestown residents, was the precipitating occasion of the murderous attack. As a specific event, the mass suicide must be seen as a consequence of the expedition.

It is not easy to answer the question of what would have happened had the expedition not taken place at all, or not turned out as it did, since there are so many alternative scenarios. Conducting "mental experiments" to consider "what would happen if..." is a delicate matter. Yet as Geoffrey Hawthorne (1991) has argued, the consideration of alternative scenarios can deepen an analysis if the counterfactual hypotheses are neither so distant from the course of events to be irrelevant nor so unstable in their dynamics as to make prediction unreliable. With these guidelines in mind, it is possible to push toward a deeper — though necessarily tentative — understanding of the murders and mass suicide.

On the one hand, had the Concerned Relatives not formed an organized group, and had they not achieved some success in their substantial efforts to bring a critical mass of journalistic coverage and a U.S. congressman to their side, it seems unlikely that the mass suicide would have occurred. Indeed, when they first formed, the Concerned Relatives understood their own powerlessness, and they sought out sympathetic news reporters precisely as patrons who would help them.

After Jones and his followers migrated to Jonestown, the opponents took concerted actions through legal and administrative channels, but these actions failed to advance their cause, and it was because they became frustrated with their prospects within institutional channels of conflict resolution that they turned to publicity campaigns in the media and the political intervention of a congressman's "fact-finding" expedition.

Clearly then, the actions of the apostates and relatives were crucial to catalyzing the dynamic of conflict between Peoples Temple and the outside, and this conflict is a necessary component of any explanation of the mass suicide that actually occurred. It is impossible, however, to say with certainty whether a mass suicide would have occurred without the Ryan expedition. Certainly there are plausible scenarios in which a mass suicide would not have taken place. For example, the opponents might have won some legal battles, gained better access to visitation with relatives, and won other concessions without confronting the Temple with complete subordination to external authority. Even more likely, given time, the entire enterprise at Jonestown might have collapsed from internal dissension, as the vast majority of communal groups do (cf. Kanter 1972). In light of these possibilities, the murders and mass suicide were in no way inevitable.

On the other hand, it is also apparent that even without the Ryan trip, the conflict between the Concerned Relatives and the Temple was extremely intense, and the Concerned Relatives were willing to pursue it even in the face of threatened violent responses. They might have gained other victories to which the leadership at Jonestown would likely have responded with violence. For example, had Grace Stoen and Timothy Stoen won legal custody over John Victor Stoen, a different violent confrontation — and mass suicide — might have ensued. In other words, within the broad channels of contestation between Peoples Temple and the

Concerned Relatives, the potential for violence could have been unleased in more than one scenario.

Here, the question of John Victor Stoen's biological paternity is the remaining major mystery of the tragedy. Much anecdotal evidence suggests that Jim Jones was the biological father of John Stoen: his paternity was affirmed in an affidavit by Tim Stoen in 1972 only days after the boy's birth (Hall 1987, pp. 127–28), and taken as fact both within the Temple and by certain people outside the group — well before the issue became folded into the conflict between the Temple and its opponents. Tim Stoen only denied Jones's claim publicly much later, when he took the side of Grace Stoen in the custody battle. To date, the evidence is not conclusive, but the weight of it leans to the paternity of Jim Jones.

If Jones was indeed the biological father, then a central atrocity claimed by the Concerned Relatives during their campaign against the Temple — that Jones amounted to the kidnapper of a child — would lose considerable of its moral (though not legal) force, and one significant element of the opponents' brief against Peoples Temple would turn out to have been based on a public construction of reality that differed from privately held knowledge. Resolving this question might sharpen our opinions about the moral high ground held by the two sides. At the time, however, it would have resolved neither the cultural conflict between communalism and familial individualism nor the struggle over whether the adult people of Jonestown had the right to live in isolation from the direct intervention of opponents who sought to dismantle their community. And it probably would not have altered the commitments of the true believers at Jonestown to extreme violence, should their opponents prevail in subordinating them to external social and legal authority.

A second controversy — about government agencies — is even murkier.

The Concerned Relatives triggered some governmental investigations of Peoples Temple. But other government initiatives preceded the emergence of the Concerned Relatives as an organized group, and the inquiries of various government agencies fed on one another. In particular, the U.S. government had diplomatic and strategic concerns about the socialist government of Guyana, and its embassy in Georgetown sent operatives on monitoring visits to the Jonestown settlement. Both because the United States government might have been able to prevent the tragedy and because government officials and representatives may have acted in ways that propelled it, there has been considerable speculation about the government's role. One book weaves together some well established facts with highly questionable inferences to raise the question of whether Jonestown was a "CIA medical experiment" (Meiers 1988). Whatever the truth of the matter, such accounts cannot be easily assessed because the U.S. government has suppressed information about its dealings with Peoples Temple, partly on the basis of the sensitivity of its geopolitical interests.[2] If remaining government files on Peoples Temple can be examined, they may well yield significant reassessments of its history (the same holds for the NBC video "outakes" from its Jonestown coverage, which the network has refused to make public).

Whatever comes of the search for more information, causal analysis of available evidence substantially revises the popular myth of Jonestown. Without question, the apocalypse at Jonestown was an immense tragedy. The Concerned Relatives, Leo Ryan, and the press will no doubt continue to be portrayed as tragic heroes in the affair. Yet there is a deeper tragedy. It is now evident that the opponents' own actions were consequential in precipitating a course of events that presumably led to the fulfillment of their own worst fears. The murders and mass

suicide cannot be adequately explained except as the outcome of an escalating conflict between two diametrically opposed groups — Peoples Temple and the Concerned Relatives.

Other religious groups important to American religious history — the Pilgrims and the Mormons, for example — previously met with pitched opposition from relatives and public detractors, yet they managed to persist and to succeed in ways important for the culture of American religion. By contrast, Peoples Temple was a dramatic failure. Yet even so, the history of the movement reflects many of the tensions and contradictions of American culture. Its members sought to participate in an integrated community that transcended persistent racism in the United States. In a society where the practice of religion is largely segregated from everyday social and economic organization and practice, the group infused its members' working lives and social relationships with new "religious" meaning. These aspects neither justify nor compensate for the tragic conflict that Jones long cultivated. But the seldom acknowledged accomplishments of Peoples Temple stand as stark reminders that the U.S. has failed to achieve anything like a societal community based on racial integration, equal opportunity, and economic justice. Jonestown, we now know, came at the time when the liberal and left social movements that had been active in American politics during the 1960s and '70s were losing their influence. Ronald Reagan soon followed, proclaiming a pride-filled "morning in America."

There is considerable irony in all this. Much of the criticism of Peoples Temple focussed on the group's practices — faked healings, money-making schemes, glorification of a prophet, intimidation and punishment, public relations, and political manipulations. This auto-da-fé could only proceed by placing on Jim Jones and Peoples Temple the burden of bearing evils that are widespread and

sometimes institutionalized in the wider society. Yet unfortunately Jones was hardly a creative man. To the contrary, however crudely, he mimicked and sometimes intensified practices that he drew from the wider culture. Jones established an organization with alien ends, to be sure, but that organization owed its success in no small part to the fact that its cultural inventory of means mostly came from the wider world. Thus the Temple's realm of opposition to the world at large often enough was but a mirror of it, sometimes a grotesque reflection of its seamier side. After the mass suicide, those who loaded the moral burden of evil onto Jonestown symbolically cleansed the wider society, but this ritual exorcism left behind elements of Jonestown culture still alive in our world — in techniques of social control, religious practices, politics, public relations. The "negative cult" of Jonestown thus stands as an ominous monument to an arsenal of manipulations that persist in wider institutional practices. To isolate this arsenal, its boundaries must be drawn more widely than the jungle commune.

A different irony was reflected in the future of memory. Jonestown fulfilled the most dire warnings of its opponents. After the murders and mass suicide, Peoples Temple became the quintessence of the "cult," stereotypically portrayed as an organization that drains both property and free will from its members and "brainwashes" them into a "group mind." Yet these issues have nothing specific to do with Peoples Temple's sustained and increasingly violent interpretation of revolutionary suicide as a doctrine of struggle against an established social order. Instead, they reject communalism more generally as a form of life alien to capitalist democratic society. The tragedy of Jonestown thus became an opportunity for scapegoating a broader form of social organization that is not inherently associated with mass suicide. Here, the conflict that produced Jonestown was recapitulated at the core of its mythical reconstruction, for the demonization of communalism as

"other" reinforces the ideology of individualism, thus providing the grounds for further antagonism between communalists and their cultural opponents. As we will see, the image of Jonestown resonated in the life of the Branch Davidians in subtle yet consequential ways.

CHAPTER 1: THE APOCALYPSE AT JONESTOWN

1. Unless otherwise indicated, information for this chapter is drawn from Gone From the Promised Land: Jonestown in American Cultural History (Hall 1987). See also Hall ([1979] 1990), Moore (1985), Chidester (1988), Moore and McGeehee (1988), and Maaga (1998).

2. The CIA reportedly has burned its files concerning its operations in Guyana during the 1960s, when socialist Forbes Burnham came to power; see IHT 30 May 1997, p. 1, 7.