

THE REVEREND JIM JONES AND RELIGIOUS, POLITICAL, AND RACIAL
RADICALISM IN PEOPLES TEMPLE

by

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ABSTRACT

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On November 18, 1978 over 900 members of Peoples Temple committed suicide or were murdered in Jonestown, Guyana under the direction of Reverend Jim Jones. This thesis explores the radical ideology of Jones leading up to and including the day of the murder-suicides by poisoned Flavor-Aid. Jones was a radical theologically, politically, and in racial thinking, although he was not an advocate for women's rights. Jones claimed to be a prophet and then God, criticized the Bible and became atheistic, called himself a Marxist, a socialist, and a Communist, and strove for equal rights for minorities in the United States through his interactions with the Black Panther Party and prominent black religious figures, including Father Divine. The "cult" was said to have committed "revolutionary suicide," a phrase used by Huey Newton. Jones' radicalism in Peoples Temple may be one factor that ultimately led to the destruction of Jonestown that day.

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Introduction

I entered the realm of Jonestown scholarship in 2008 unexpectedly. Not knowing much about Jim Jones and his Peoples Temple but having had an interest in the group for some time, I watched Stanley Nelson's documentary on PBS, *Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple* (2006). The documentary clarified the vision of Peoples Temple as Stanley Nelson viewed it, emphasizing its resemblance to a counterculture movement over a religious "cult" or a traditional Christian group. Nelson's documentary inspired me to write a paper, "Selling Jonestown: Religion, Socialism, and Revolutionary Suicide in Peoples Temple," as an undergraduate at California State University-San Marcos. In that paper, I focused on what I believed to be the "true religion" in Jonestown: socialism. I presented the paper at conferences and began to develop and strengthen my argument as I received feedback from professors and attendees at these conferences.

While living in Southern California, I met people connected to the Jonestown Institute and former Peoples Temple members. I wrote articles for the San Diego State University-sponsored Jonestown Institute under the guidance of Research Director Fielding McGehee and Dr. Rebecca Moore, Religious Studies Professor and Site Manager of the Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple. I transcribed newly-released FBI tapes of Jim Jones' sermons for the Jonestown Institute, which gave me access to material that has not yet widely been used by other historians. I met Laura Johnston Kohl, a Peoples Temple survivor who introduced me to other former Peoples Temple members and invited me to their annual events and ceremonies. Through talking to these former Peoples Temple members and working on projects for the Jonestown Institute, I became immersed in the project and began to develop a

new perspective on Jim Jones that differed from other historians' perspectives: one emphasizing Jones' radical ideology concerning religion, politics, and race.

Existing scholarship emphasizes change over time within Peoples Temple. However, I argue that Jones' radical beliefs existed even before his conception of Peoples Temple. I have collected information from many sources: transcripts of Jones' sermons made available through the Jonestown Institute, documents from the California Historical Society, and past writings about the Reverend Jim Jones, Peoples Temple, and Jonestown. Using new information available, such as the FBI-collected tapes of Jones' sermons and addresses to his congregation, I maintain my argument for Jones' consistent radicalism in Peoples Temple. By relying heavily on Jones' own words to support my argument, my thesis adds a new interpretation of the existing scholarship. The California Historical Society in San Francisco yielded much new information through rare newspaper clippings and personal documents about Jones and Peoples Temple. While some of these materials are accessible online, the archives contain many otherwise unobtainable documents. Access to these resources has given me a unique and new perspective on Jim Jones, for many of these materials have not been previously made available to historians.

I have divided my thesis into four chapters. The first chapter gives necessary background information and the last three chapters describe different aspects of Jones' ideology. Chapter 1 gives an overview of the history of Jim Jones, Peoples Temple, and Jonestown, from the birth of Jim Jones in 1931 until the aftermath of the massacre in Guyana. The chapter addresses the historiography of scholarship on Jim Jones and his Peoples Temple. In the final section of the chapter, I differentiate between religions and cults, offering definitions of the two and explaining my choice not to use the word "cult" to describe Peoples Temple, which is a controversial topic among historians and other scholars.

Chapter 2 explores Jim Jones' radical religious beliefs. The chapter recalls Jones' assertion of possessing God-like abilities, as exemplified through his (later proven to be fraudulent) faith healing and his claims to be God Himself. I contend that Peoples Temple was not a traditional Christian church even in the early years of its existence, although many scholars have argued the opposite, maintaining that Jones began his career as a traditional Pentecostal preacher who transitioned into a cult leader in Guyana. After reviewing many sources, I argue that Jones was a radical before the creation of Jonestown. Jones implored his followers to throw out their Bibles in California, before the group reached Guyana. Jones condemned religious teachings, at times focusing on the moral implications of the text but ridiculing the historical aspects of the Bible and its influence on its followers. Chapter 2 continues with a discussion of the religion of Peoples Temple. Was Peoples Temple a Pentecostal church, as Jones claimed it to be, or was it another type of organization entirely? I will use examples of different opinions about the church and its characteristics as different scholars weigh in on the subject. Finally, the chapter concludes with a comparative study of "doomsday cults" and "millennial groups." I have selected Aum Shrinrikyo and Heaven's Gate for study, two groups bearing similarities to Jim Jones' Peoples Temple. I argue that it has become imperative to study and understand these types of organizations and perhaps to intervene before another "Jonestown" occurs.

Chapter 3 sheds light on Jim Jones' radical political beliefs. The chapter begins with a brief history of socialist philosophers and socialist utopias. I argue that Jim Jones' beliefs fell into this lineage of radical thinkers, although Jones' beliefs were much more radical than past socialists' ideologies. A self-proclaimed Marxist, Jones shared his beliefs with his congregation and later admitted to purposefully "infiltrating the church" with his unorthodox ideas. This chapter outlines Jones' political involvement in Indianapolis, Indiana and San Francisco,

California. In both cities Jones organized activities that benefitted minorities and the underprivileged. However, in addition to performing charitable works, from an early age Jones supported Communist leaders and espoused the tenants of socialism, condemning capitalism and the United States government. He passed these radical beliefs to his followers, as evidenced through many sermons and community meeting addresses recorded over the years of Peoples Temple's existence. Creating a socialist utopian society in Jonestown, Guyana, free from the "evils" of the United States and its capitalist system became the goal of Jones and his Peoples Temple. Until the collapse of Jonestown, Jones and his followers still believed in the "socialist dream," with most people choosing to drink poisoned Flavor-Aid rather than returning to the "oppressive" United States.

Chapter 4 explores Jim Jones' relationships with race and women within Peoples Temple and in society as a whole. I compare Jones to other radical religious and racial thinkers such as Father Divine. I also argue that similarities existed between Jones, Sweet Daddy Grace, and Bishop Smallwood Williams. These ties have not often been made by historians, who instead choose to focus solely on Father Divine's Peace Mission Movement. I argue that Peoples Temple's services closely resembled a black church's and that through this tactic, Jones attracted a large number of African-American parishioners to his racially integrated services. Jones was acutely aware of racial issues, particularly in Peoples Temple's founding city of Indianapolis. I argue that the strong presence of the Ku Klux Klan and Jones' personal experiences with racism led him to fight for civil rights. In California, Jones began to use Black Panther Party rhetoric. This connection has not always been made by historians, many of whom do not emphasize the African-American experience in Peoples Temple. One notable exception is *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America*, a collection of essays edited by Rebecca Moore, Anthony B. Pinn,

and Mary Sawyer, which designates Peoples Temple as a black church. The end of Jonestown was inspired by Black Panther leader Huey P. Newton, as Jones borrowed the phrase “revolutionary suicide” to describe the mass-suicides, although I argue that Jones distorted the meaning of Newton’s phrase as he led his followers to their deaths. Instead I argue that the group committed “reactionary suicide,” another term used by Huey Newton. This subtle nuance has gone unrecognized by most scholars, for the term “revolutionary suicide” has been almost universally accepted as the action taken on that final day in Jonestown. Lastly, I explore the role of women in Peoples Temple and in other utopian socialist communes. Despite Jones’ radicalism in other areas, he was not an advocate for women’s rights.

I have considered the works of past writers and have added to the existing scholarship. I have expanded the Jim Jones, Peoples Temple, and Jonestown narrative by arguing that Jones did not simply lose his mind in Jonestown on November 18, 1978 but that he was a radical from an early age to the death of Peoples Temple. Preoccupied with subversive thoughts, self-destruction, death, and the end times, as indicated by the stockpiling of cyanide and the pre-massacre “suicide drills,” or “white nights,” Jones was a radical throughout his life. By using Jones’ words from his sermons and addresses to Peoples Temple members, I have constructed a perspective emphasizing this radicalism. I conclude that Jones’ unorthodox beliefs and practices led to the collapse of the Peoples Temple Agricultural Project, more commonly known as Jonestown.

Writers have argued that Peoples Temple began as a traditional Pentecostal church and ended with the murder-suicides of over 900 brainwashed cultists. While I agree that Peoples Temple looked like a traditional Pentecostal church in the beginning, I will argue that the radical elements of the organization were always present. Some scholars have argued that Jones’

transition from Pentecostal preacher to “cult leader” was sudden. The change in Peoples Temples’ practices has often been attributed to Jones’ declining physical and mental health, although these changes in his well-being have not been proven to be true. Others have argued that the deaths of Peoples Temple resulted from the “brainwashing” of Peoples Temple members in Jonestown or the murders of Leo Ryan and his entourage at the Port Kaituma airstrip. Although the murder of a congressman was almost certainly a major catalyst for the self-implosion in Jonestown, other factors such as Jones’ radicalism should be considered as reasons for the death of Peoples Temple.

I offer a new viewpoint on Jones’ ideology and reasons for Peoples Temple’s collapse. During the early years of Peoples Temple in Indianapolis, Jones’ unorthodox ideas influenced his racially integrated church. For many years, Jim Jones and his followers believed they could enact change from within the system. They worked to help minorities and the poor, mobilized their efforts for liberal politicians, and strove to create a multiracial church. After the move to Jonestown, Jones’ dream of improving the conditions in the United States turned to skepticism. An atmosphere of fear and paranoia resulted within Peoples Temple as Jones’ followers, secluded from the outside world, began to believe they could never live in a capitalist system such as the United States where plans for concentration camps were possible and racism and unequal distribution of wealth existed. Finally, I argue that Jones, not a traditional Christian preacher but a radical in his religious, political, and racial thinking, contributed to the end of Jonestown through these unconventional beliefs and practices. The socialist utopia of Jonestown could not survive under such radical conditions and ultimately imploded violently with the deaths of over 900 people in November of 1978.

Chapter 1: Jim Jones and Peoples Temple's History, Historiography, and Definitions

Jim Jones and Peoples Temple: An Overview

Jim Warren Jones was born May 13, 1931 in Lynn, Indiana to an underprivileged working-class family. “There’s a little town in Indiana. The moment I think of it a great deal of pain comes. As a child I was undoubtedly one of the poor in the community, never accepted. Born as it were on the wrong side of the tracks,” Jones lamented in one sermon, perhaps indicating the source of his desire to care for the marginalized in society. In the documentary *Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple*, Phyllis Wilmore-Zimmerman, a childhood friend of Jones, recalls, “[His] father did not work, did not have a job, and was a drunk. Jim’s mother had to work in order to support the family.” Others described the Jones family as “dysfunctional.” From an early age, interviewees claimed that Jones took an interest in religion and performed services for neighborhood children. One neighbor of the Joneses contends that Jim Jones killed a cat with a knife and then held a funeral service for it. “From the time I was five years old, I thought Jimmy was a really weird kid, there was something not quite right,” remembers Chuck Wilmore, another childhood friend of Jones. “He was obsessed with religion; he was obsessed with death.”¹

As he grew older, Jones saw the rampant racism in Indiana and decided to become a preacher, giving him the power to integrate his own church. Created in the early 1950s in Indianapolis, Peoples Temple attracted people of all socioeconomic and racial backgrounds. “Every single person felt that they had a purpose there and that they were exceptionally special,”

¹ *American Experience: Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple*, directed by Stanley Nelson, (WBGH Educational Foundation, 2007), DVD.

recalls Deborah Layton, a former Peoples Temple member. “And that is how he brought so many young college kids in, so many old black women in, so many people from diverse backgrounds who realized that there was something bigger than themselves that they needed to be involved in—and that Jim Jones offered that.” However, integration in the church created controversy in Indianapolis as not everyone accepted the concept of Jones’ multiracial congregation.²

The harassment of Jones and his followers from outside sources prompted a move in the mid-1960s to California, believed by Peoples Temple members to be a more progressive state than Indiana. Another motivator for the move was Jones’ growing paranoia regarding the possibility of a nuclear holocaust. He purportedly read an article that claimed Ukiah, California was one of the safest places to be in the United States during nuclear fallout, and so the group headed west. After arriving in California, Peoples Temple and Jim Jones became more politically active, helping Democratic candidates win local elections and serving the poor and minorities in the community. Peoples Temple and Jim Jones were recognized for their efforts and praised by many politicians and journalists during this time.³

However, the golden era for Peoples Temple in California soon ended. After several instances of bad publicity in San Franciscan newspapers concerning Reverend Jones’ supposed mistreatment of his people, Jones set in motion his vision of a socialist utopian society. The commune would be located in Guyana, a South American nation that Jones believed would welcome Peoples Temple and their unorthodox beliefs and practices. Jones was an advocate for socialism and communism throughout Peoples Temple’s existence but his utopian dream was realized with the founding of the Peoples Temple Agricultural Project, or Jonestown. Many of

² *American Experience: Jonestown*, dir. Stanley Nelson.

³ *American Experience: Jonestown*, dir. Stanley Nelson.

Jones' followers in California made the move to Guyana, establishing themselves as part of Jim Jones' socialist experiment.⁴

Jones' troubles did not end once Peoples Temple began to settle in Jonestown. A group called the Concerned Relatives filed complaints against Jones, charging that the Reverend would not let people leave Guyana and that he physically, emotionally, and sexually abused Peoples Temple members. These statements prompted California State Representative Leo Ryan and a small entourage to visit Jonestown on November 17, 1978 to investigate these claims. Ryan inspected Jonestown and found nothing amiss until Peoples Temple member Vern Gosney and others slipped the congressman notes the next day. These members wanted to leave Guyana but claimed that Jones would not permit it. Jackie Speier, an aide to Congressman Ryan, realized that "at this point, we knew something was very, very wrong." Ryan confronted Jones with the notes. Contrary to prior accusations that Jones was keeping people against their will in Guyana, Jones told a visiting reporter that people were free to depart whenever they pleased but took aim at the Concerned Relatives: "People play games, friend. They lie... What can I do about liars? Are you people going to—leave us. I just beg you, leave us... We will bother nobody. Anybody who wants to get out of here, can get out of here. They have no problem getting out of here. They come and go all the time." A few Peoples Temple members decided to leave Jonestown with Ryan's staff. However, most of the group did not make it out of Jonestown alive. Ryan, his entourage, and the defectors were ambushed at the Port Kaituma airstrip. Peoples Temple members in trucks opened fire upon the crowd. Five people were killed, including Congressman Leo Ryan. Others were wounded, but survived the attack.⁵

⁴ *American Experience: Jonestown*, dir. Stanley Nelson.

⁵ *American Experience: Jonestown*, dir. Stanley Nelson.

After the shooting at the airstrip, Jones called a meeting in the Jonestown pavilion. A vat of cyanide-laced grape Flavor-Aid had been prepared. As loyal followers passed out the drink, Jones implored his people to “lay down [their] lives” by drinking the concoction. Some members took the poison willingly, others were coerced or drank the poison after witnessing the deaths of family and friends. Jones claimed Peoples Temple was committing “revolutionary suicide,” protesting the “conditions of an inhumane world,” particularly referring to the capitalist United States. “Hurry, hurry, my children, hurry! All right, let us not fall into the hands of the enemy. Hurry my children!” Jones can be heard shouting on the infamous “death tape” recorded during the murder-suicides. “Die with respect die with a degree of dignity It’s [sic] nothing to death, it’s just stepping over into another plane.” Over 900 men, women, and children died in Jonestown that day in what has been called “the largest mass suicide in modern history.”⁶

Historiography of Peoples Temple

Many works have been published about Jim Jones and his Peoples Temple. The authors have attempted to recreate a narrative of the events or to understand why the deaths happened that day in Jonestown. While I have been inspired by and built upon these works, I bring a different viewpoint to the analysis of the group. Most writings about Jones and his Peoples Temple have been written by journalists, survivors, or historians and other scholars who have not had access to the sources that I have been able to use. Because I have read and listened to Jones’ newly-released sermons and visited the California Historical Society to view rare documents, I have revised the perspective on Jones’ radicalism.

⁶ *American Experience: Jonestown*, dir. Stanley Nelson.

One category of books on Jim Jones and Peoples Temple was published by journalists soon after the deaths. Often these books were sensationalized, capitalizing on the mass murder-suicides in Jonestown. Marshall Kilduff and Ron Javers' *Suicide Cult: The Inside Story of the Peoples Temple Sect and the Massacre in Guyana* (1978) was released not long after the deaths in Jonestown. This quick publication turnaround shows that not much scholarly research could have been done for the book in such a short amount of time. The FBI-seized sermon tapes were not yet available, so Kilduff and Javers relied on testimonies and preliminary findings about Jones and his Peoples Temple for their account of the events. A similar exploitative book, *Hold Hands and Die!* (1978), written by John Maguire and Mary Lee Dunn, suffers from many of the same problems. *Hold Hands and Die!* does not contain much scholarly research because it was released so quickly after the deaths. There simply was not enough time to gather the necessary information needed for a deeper analysis of Jim Jones and Peoples Temple.

Memoirs offer another source of material available about Jim Jones, Peoples Temple, and Jonestown. However, survivors and former members of the group may have problems retaining accurate memories. The authors, including former Peoples Temple member Deborah Layton, writer of *Seductive Poison: A Jonestown Survivor's Story of Life and Death in the Peoples Temple* (1998), recall events, people, places, and conversations from decades earlier to tell their stories. Memory is not always a trusted source of information as it can fade and change over time. Personal bias may also exist within these memoirs. For these reasons, it becomes necessary to read the voices of many survivors and former members to ascertain if there is a consensus, although no two stories are exactly alike.

A third category of books on Jonestown includes works by historians. Mark Lane's *The Strongest Poison* (1980) is one of the earliest scholarly books published about Jim Jones, Peoples

Temple, and Jonestown. This account explores conspiracy theories and Lane questions whether the United States government could have stopped the murder-suicides. Lane explores the role of the media in the coverage of the event, pondering if false information was released about the deaths in Jonestown. Lane even speculates that the death of California State Representative Leo Ryan could have been a conspiracy.⁷ The author writes, “Almost immediately following the mass murder in Guyana, it became apparent that the agencies of the United States government were at work to obfuscate the relevant evidence.”⁸ This book not only covers the Peoples Temple narrative; it seeks to answer questions that were posed immediately following the mass murder-suicides.

Several authors set out to find the “untold story” of Jonestown. John Peer Nugent, author of *White Night: The Untold Story of What Happened Before—and Beyond—Jonestown* (1979), begins the Peoples Temple narrative twenty years before the deaths at Jonestown. This account includes speculation about the United States government creating a “climate for violence” through its politics during the 1950s through the 1970s. Nugent posits that Jonestown was not an isolated “freak” occurrence but rather an event that came as a result of the United States’ social and political environment. Furthermore, he argues that another incident like Jonestown could happen.⁹ He also explores reasons why the members of Peoples Temple followed Jones’ orders, considering Hannah Arendt’s “banality of evil” argument and self-delusion through “psychic numbing” and “middle knowledge.” Nugent explains these delusions as “knowing and not knowing at the same time,” which may illuminate how the members of Peoples Temple coped with the knowledge that cyanide was being shipped into Jonestown and other developments

⁷ Mark Lane, *The Strongest Poison* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1980), 10.

⁸ Lane, *The Strongest Poison*, 3.

⁹ John Peer Nugent, *White Night: The Untold Story of What Happened Before—and Beyond—Jonestown* (New York: Rawson, Wade Publishers, Inc., 1979), dust jacket.

leading to the mass murder-suicides.¹⁰ Nugent's work adds to the scholarship, exploring new questions about the organization and its place in the United States.

More recent scholarship regarding Peoples Temple is less sensational and exploitative than the works that immediately followed the deaths in Jonestown. John R. Hall, author of *Gone from the Promised Land: Jonestown in American Cultural History* (2004), analyzes Peoples Temple by placing Jonestown in the context of American cultural history rather than calling Peoples Temple an independent religious movement. The author focuses on Peoples Temple's beginnings and cultural origins, seeking to determine whether another mass murder-suicide such as at Jonestown could happen again.¹¹ Hall studies the long line of work before him and incorporates some newer material, namely, FBI tapes that had just been released. However, in 2004 not all of the sermons had been transcribed and still have not all been transcribed. Hall's work represents this third category of writers: those who have researched the topic rather than accounting for the events solely through eyewitness testimony, interviews, preliminary findings, or remembering personal experiences in Peoples Temple.

Salvation and Suicide: Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown (2003) tells the Jonestown narrative, but author David Chidester also uses more recently made available sources such as the sermon tapes, although he did not have access to all of the tapes that have been transcribed. He focuses on Jones' motivation for the suicides, including the Reverend's belief that Peoples Temple needed to escape the evils of the United States' capitalist system. Chidester makes note of the methodology used in *Salvation and Suicide*: "The method employed in this book might be called religiohistorical interpretation, worldview analysis, or the phenomenology

¹⁰ Nugent, *White Night*, 258.

¹¹ John R. Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land: Jonestown in American Cultural History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2004).

of religion. Ninian Smart has called it ‘structured empathy.’ Structured by such interpretive categories as symbol, myth, ritual, classification, and orientation, the method is open to an empathic understanding of the worldview of others.”¹² Chidester’s treatment of the subject is a marked departure from the earlier sensationalized works.

Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America (2004), edited by Rebecca Moore, Anthony B. Pinn, and Mary R. Sawyer, examines Jonestown from a different background: the black religious experience in the United States. The editors point out that although the leadership of Peoples Temple was predominantly white, the majority of the group was African-American. The group was influenced both by religion and politics, conducting social protests and social activities as well as religious services. The reason for constructing this collection of ten essays, the editors write, is to view Peoples Temple not only from the theoretical framework of New Religious Movements (NRMs), but to look at the group from several disciplines. This collection of essays adds to the understanding of Jonestown and Peoples Temple as more than purely a religious movement, but one that warrants sociological and psychological study as well.¹³ I have built upon ideas presented in this book, particularly the ways in which Peoples Temple combined religion and politics.

Rebecca Moore’s *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple* (2009) is a thorough account of the events leading up to and beyond the murder-suicides of November 18, 1978. Moore’s book sheds light on Peoples Temple and the mass murder-suicides at Jonestown by using a variety of primary and secondary sources to create a scholarly appraisal of the events in a

¹² David Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide: Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003), xiv.

¹³ Rebecca Moore, Anthony B. Pinn, and Mary R. Sawyer, eds., *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), xii.

surprisingly objective narrative.¹⁴ The book covers the time span of 1931-2009, from Jim Jones' birth until the book's publication, as Moore has included updates and interviews with survivors of Peoples Temple. The account moves chronologically, from Jones' time spent in Indiana through the group's existence in California and then Guyana. After the murder-suicides, Moore continues the story through those who survived the massacre. The author's goal is to provide an alternative perspective of Peoples Temple and Jonestown: one that does not depict the members of the group as brainwashed cultists, but rather as survivors of a horrific event brought on by the Reverend Jim Jones.¹⁵

My research expands upon the existing research about Jim Jones. An evolution of radical activity within Peoples Temple exists, as other historians have argued; however, I maintain that these radical elements were present from Jones' childhood, young adulthood, and the formation of the church. John R. Hall and John Peer Nugent contend that the political and social climate in the United States could result in another "Jonestown." I agree that this is an important perspective to consider. Jones' radicalism, created by perceived "evils" of the United States, may have been one of several reasons for the murder-suicides on November 18, 1978.

Was Peoples Temple a Religious Group or a Cult?

What was Peoples Temple? A religious organization, a cult, or something else entirely? Many historians, journalists, and others agree that the group fit the criteria for a cult when the

¹⁴ Moore's sisters, Carolyn Moore Layton and Annie Moore, died in Jonestown on November 18, 1978.

¹⁵ Rebecca Moore, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2009).

church moved to Jonestown in the mid-1970s. The task of defining a religion is a difficult one.

Jonathan Z. Smith writes in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*,

...*There is no data for religion* [emphasis Smith's]. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy. For this reason, the student of religion, and most particularly the historian of religion, must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study.¹⁶

Keeping Smith's excerpt in mind, the historian is free to define religion under his or her own

terms. I use the term "religion" and write about Jim Jones' "congregation" or "organization"

rather than labeling Peoples Temple as a "cult," which commonly has a negative connotation.

The members of Peoples Temple did not view themselves as participating in a cult and so I will

respect their perspective and refer to the group as a religious one or as a social movement.

"Nobody joins a cult," former Peoples Temple member Deborah Layton asserts in the

documentary *Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple*. She continues, "You join a

religious organization, you join a political movement, and you join with people that you really

like."¹⁷ Considering Layton's perspective, I will not call Peoples Temple a cult. Nevertheless, the

group did possess cult-like characteristics according to some definitions offered by scholars.

After the deaths in Guyana, many journalists and historians defined "cult" in terms that I

argue were tailored to fit Peoples Temple. In an article printed February 6, 1979 in the *San*

Francisco Examiner, Tom Eastham penned the article "Clerics Defend Religions as Different

from Cults." Eastham interviewed Reverend James LeBar, a representative of the New York

Catholic archdiocese. LeBar identifies these "pseudo-religious cults" such as Peoples Temple as

¹⁶ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xi.

¹⁷ *American Experience: Jonestown*, dir. Stanley Nelson.

having four basic characteristics: 1) a very close allegiance to a person rather than to God; 2) inordinate preoccupation with money—not for the poor or charity, but for the leader; 3) deceptive practices in recruitment; and 4) deprivation of freedom within the group—and in particular, the freedom to leave.¹⁸ If these qualifications are accepted, Peoples Temple fits LeBar’s definition of a “pseudo-religious cult.” Peoples Temple members came to know Jim Jones as God, Jones collected a large amount of money and property from his followers, Peoples Temple falsely advertised itself as a Pentecostal church, and Jones prevented members from leaving the Jonestown commune in Guyana.

Jackie Speier, aide to California Congressman Leo Ryan, defines cults in the same article: “They offer a ready-made substitute family, coupled with a very strong charismatic leader acting as a father figure who has the ability to mesmerize his followers. Mind control seems to be implemented through intimidation, coercion, forced and sometimes aberrant sexual conduct, drugs, food deprivation, sleep deprivation, and divestment of worldly possessions.”¹⁹ Jones did offer a “ready-made substitute family,” and was a charismatic leader, which is not unusual for a religious group to have at its head. However, Speier’s charges that cults include mind control tactics to sway their member does separate traditional churches from cult-like groups. In Jonestown, Jones was charged with some of these tactics, such as sleep deprivation. Deborah Layton recalls, “In Jonestown, there was a speaker system and only Jim spoke on it. And it went twenty-four hours a day and he would tape himself. So, in the middle of the night, all through the night, his voice was talking to you.”²⁰

¹⁸ Tom Eastham, “Clerics Defend Religions as Different from Cults,” *San Francisco Examiner*, February 6, 1979, p. 9, MS 4125, Oversize Box 1, California Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

¹⁹ Eastham, “Clerics Defend Religions as Different from Cults.”

²⁰ *American Experience: Jonestown*, dir. Stanley Nelson.

Senator Edward Zorinsky (D-Nebraska) also contributes to the conversation about religion in the United States, taking a slightly different position. He claims that “the right to hold unusual and unconventional religious beliefs in this country must be absolutely protected... It would indeed be ironic if, after fleeing Europe to escape religious persecution, our founding fathers gave birth to a new persecution and an intolerant nation.”²¹ According to Zorinsky’s assertions, Peoples Temple should have been left to operate as it saw fit in peace. However, in its later years, Peoples Temple merely acted as religion to protect itself from outside “dangers,” instead more closely resembling a subversive counterculture movement. Jones was able to promote Peoples Temple as a church so that it could be left undisturbed by outside influences.

Mary McCormick Maaga, author of *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown: Putting a Face on an American Tragedy*, takes the stance that Peoples Temple should not be referred to as a cult. She uses the term “New Religious Movement,” identifying the group’s religious nature but also recognizing Peoples Temple as a movement as Jones pushed his group to inspire change in the world, particularly before Peoples Temple’s move to Guyana in the mid-1970s. “The difficulty with using [the term cult] is that it has been used pejoratively by the anticult movement and sensationally by the media so that it is no longer clear that it can be used as a neutral descriptive term in social scientific inquiry,” writes Maaga. Additionally, she argues that sects and cults are two different types of groups. Sects split off from existing organizations, such as Peoples Temple did from the Pentecostal Church, whereas cults arise “out of the general social environment because of a religious or spiritual innovation that is attractive to a number of people.” She argues that Jones created a sect, as he “was not claiming to have created something new with Peoples

²¹ Eastham, “Clerics Defend Religions as Different from Cults.”

Temple. Rather, he was calling his followers back to the ‘authentic’ Christianity reflected in the ministry of Jesus Christ to the outcasts of society.’²²

I refer to Peoples Temple as a religion, a congregation, a group, or an organization. The word “cult” has a negative implication, as Religious Studies Professor Mary McCormick Maaga has argued, although Peoples Temple certainly contained cult-like elements according to the definitions presented in this chapter. The Peoples Temple began by referring to the group as a congregation, for it outwardly resembled a Pentecostal church rather than a cultish organization, despite Jones’ radicalism. Towards the end of the group’s existence Peoples Temple could more accurately be referred to as a New Religious Movement, an Alternative Religious Movement, or even a subversive counterculture movement that followed the tenets of socialism rather than traditional Christianity.

²² Mary McCormick Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown: Putting a Face on an American Tragedy* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 76-77.

Chapter 2: Jim Jones and Religious Radicalism

Background

Many historians, journalists, and other scholars have painted Jim Jones' religious beliefs as a dichotomy throughout time and space. These writers have argued that Jones was a traditional Pentecostal preacher in the early days of Peoples Temple in Indiana and California (during the 1950s and 1960s) and an anti-religious cult leader during his later days in Jonestown (1977-1978). However, I argue that Jim Jones was a religious radical throughout Peoples Temple's existence. He called himself Reverend Jones, yet did not always adhere to the basic tenets of Christianity. While Peoples Temple began its existence by presenting itself as a Pentecostal church, the church practiced unorthodox methods that grew only more radical over the years. Jones moved away from traditional religion and towards "apostolic socialism." With the escalation of anti-church rhetoric would come the rejection of the Christian God, Jesus Christ, and the Bible as Jones positioned himself as the head of the church and worthy of sole worship by his congregation. I argue that Jones was not a preacher of Christianity and traditional biblical teachings but rather a religious radical who created a climate of fear and paranoia in Peoples Temple that would lead his followers to their deaths.

Jones was preoccupied with the end times and planned the deaths of his followers long before the end of his Peoples Temple on November 18, 1978. In addresses to his followers in Jonestown, he asked them to plan their deaths. During one community meeting held in the late 1970s, Jones and Peoples Temple members discussed the possibility of carrying out suicide

bombings at Ku Klux Klan meetings, for Jones believed death should not be wasted but should happen to support a cause.¹

Jones also practiced “white nights,” during which his followers would drink beverages provided during Peoples Temple meetings. After consuming the drinks, the members were told that they had just consumed poison. Jones would wait to see if they would continue to drink the beverage. These drinks were not poisoned; rather, the “white nights” were a test of loyalty. This experiment allowed Jones to gauge his followers’ reactions to his orders. Jones believed a positive reaction to drinking the “poison” would show Peoples Temple members’ devotion to him and his anti-capitalist, anti-United States cause. Jonestown scholar Rebecca Moore writes in *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, “No one rebelled or questioned his decision, and some expressed concern that their children were not participating along with them.” These “suicide drills” were practiced as early as 1976 in San Francisco at a Planning Commission meeting two years before the Jonestown massacre.² Jones purchased and began to accumulate cyanide in Georgetown, the capital of Guyana, “outside normal church channels.”³ As indicated through his addresses about planning the deaths of Peoples Temple members against perceived enemies, the “suicide drills,” or “white nights,” and the stockpiling of cyanide in Jonestown, Jones planned the deaths of his people long before the murder-suicides took place in 1978. My argument for Jones’ years-long push for his members to plan or accept their imminent deaths differs from the perspective of many historians and journalists who were shocked by the deaths in Jonestown on November 18, 1978.

¹ The Jonestown Institute, “Q998 Transcript,” *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, accessed August 24, 2015, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=27639.

² Rebecca Moore, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2009), 78.

³ Tim Reiterman and John Jacobs, *Raven: The Untold Story of the Rev. Jim Jones and His People* (New York: The Penguin Group, 1982), 474.

Ultimately, Jones' plan to poison his people with cyanide-laced grape-flavored Flavor-Aid would be carried out, resulting in the deaths of most of his congregation. A few Peoples Temple members survived the final day. A small number of people escaped into the Guyanese jungles.⁴ Seventy-five year old Catherine Hyacinth Thrash slept in her cabin throughout the entire massacre.⁵ Other members were in Georgetown, the capital of Guyana, for a basketball tournament the day Jones commanded his followers to commit suicide. Peoples Temple members in Georgetown and San Francisco had also received the call through radio to commit suicide. Stephan Jones, Jim Jones' natural-born son, convinced these Peoples Temple members not to follow the instructions from his father, Jim Jones. Most did not follow through on Jones' orders, except for Sharon Amos, a long-time close follower of Jones. Amos took her own life and those of her three children by slitting their throats and her own in Georgetown.⁶

Many questions were raised after the bodies of over 900 Peoples Temple members were discovered in November 1978 in Jonestown. Journalists and scholars pondered the true religion of Peoples Temple in Jonestown and whether the group was a cult, a religion, or something else entirely. I will argue that although in its infancy Peoples Temple outwardly resembled a traditional Christian church, Peoples Temple was always a religiously radical group. As time passed, Jones became more vocal that he was a prophet, the messiah, and eventually God Himself. These beliefs resulted in the sometimes blind following of Jones by loyal Peoples Temple members, most of whom would ultimately give their lives to Jones and his cause by drinking the poisoned Flavor-Aid.

⁴ John R. Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land: Jonestown in American Cultural History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2004), 287.

⁵ David Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide: Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), 162.

⁶ Moore, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, 98.

Faith Healing and Jim Jones as God in Peoples Temple

In the beginning of Peoples Temple's existence, Jones was already planning to position himself as the sole head of the church by placing himself as the Godhead. To convince Peoples Temple and outsiders that he possessed God-given curative powers, Jones practiced faith healing in the church. Faith healing was not unusual in the Pentecostal tradition, which is perhaps one reason why many historians have not argued for Jones' radicalism during this era, but I will argue that Jones took faith healing a step further by convincing his followers that he was the prophet or God as early as Peoples Temple's time in Indianapolis in the 1950s and 1960s.

Many of Jones' followers eagerly accepted his purported paranormal abilities to heal members of their afflictions, including cancer, tumors, blindness, and other medical ailments. Through these miracle cures, Jones convinced many members and outsiders that he was God, or at the very least possessed God-like abilities. "See, I'm a superman," Jones claimed in a sermon presented in the mid-1970s. "That's not being egotistical, I'm a superperson. I have just a certain evolution, a paranormal, a precognitive. I have just an extra-dimensional, extraterrestrial, some evolvment."⁷ These claims show Jones' radical beliefs about his exceptionalism and his abilities to heal people.

According to John R. Hall, author of *Gone from the Promised Land: Jonestown in American Cultural History*, Jones began to show interest in faith healing after visiting a Seventh Day Baptist Church. Although he was skeptical of the Baptists' abilities to cure ailments, Jones saw that faith healing had its advantages. Hall writes of Jones' reaction to Baptist faith healings: "These assholes, doing nothing with this thing. I couldn't see nobody healed." Jones began to

⁷ The Jonestown Institute, "Q1059-3 Transcript," *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, accessed September 3, 2015, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=28038.

practice faith healing, remarking that the Baptists were not the only ones capable of doing it. Hall relays Jones' thoughts about the situation: "If these sons of bitches can do it ... then I can do it too." Jones also recognized that faith healing would draw large crowds and bring in more money for the church.⁸ This preconceived idea to heal members of the church shows that Jones consciously made the decision to become a faith healer. The power was not a God-given ability, as many of his followers believed.

During his sermons, Jones called out members of his congregation by name, gave out their Social Security number, and named their ailments. Jones began to garner much attention for these cures, especially for treating cancers and for helping wheelchair-bound people to walk again. However, Jones was deceitful about his "healings." He asked Peoples Temple members to wrap their legs in casts, making them appear unable to walk before being "cured" during his performance. Later it was revealed that Jones persuaded trusted followers to go through people's purses and personal effects to learn more about them before he called on them to be healed.⁹ Peoples Temple members would finagle their way into potential parishioners' homes, claiming to be pregnant in order to use their bathroom. Once inside, the Temple member would "take an inventory of the residence," noting photos on the walls, drugs in the medicine cabinet, and other small details that could be passed along to Jones. During sermons, Jones would read from these "crib notes" while wearing his iconic sunglasses so that attendees could not see him reading off the papers on the pulpit.¹⁰ Knowing detailed information about his members seemingly through his gift of God-like abilities added credibility to his claims to be a prophet.

⁸ Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land*, 17-18.

⁹ Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land*, 17-20.

¹⁰ Julia Scheeres, *A Thousand Lives: The Untold Story of Hope, Deception, and Survival at Jonestown* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2011), 25.

During Peoples Temple's time in California, Jones still practiced faith healing during his services. In an *Indianapolis Star* article dated October 14, 1971, Byron C. Wells wrote that several hundred people went to see Jim Jones perform his miracle cures weekly. According to Wells, Jones proclaimed, "I am a prophet of God and I can cure both the illness of your body as well as the illness of your mind."¹¹ Peoples Temple members and outsiders accepted Jones' claims to be God and to possess healing abilities. People came to see him in droves with the hope that they would either be witness to Jones' miracle cures or even be cured themselves.

Soon after Wells' article was printed, Jones moved beyond his claim to be a messenger of God, now asserting to be God. "I am God," Jones stated matter-of-factly in an address given in the mid-1970s. "The more you see God or power or love in me, the more I can reproduce in you, and I wish to reproduce all the good that I have... I'm living in the presence of health. I'm able to walk all night and all day, and days without sleep or rest, without food, because I have entered into that which you said was God in the suppositional sky, but he never came near you. I am God Almighty."¹² This proclamation shows Jones' belief that he was the savior of his Peoples Temple. However, he recognized that not everyone would agree with his assessment, claiming, "Lot of people fight against me, too ... 'cause they want to prove I'm not God tonight, because I tore up their Skygod. But I'm going to prove I am God. I'm going to take away all the symptoms, there'll be no more burning, there'll be no more back difficulty ... I'm going to give you a ... dose of good health."¹³ Already before the move to Jonestown, Jones was cultivating an "us versus them" mentality in Peoples Temple, placing himself as his people's savior rather than Jesus or the traditional Christian God.

¹¹ Byron C. Wells, "Church Filled to See 'Cures' by Self-Proclaimed 'Prophet of God,'" *Indianapolis Star*, October 14, 1971, MS 4125, Box 1, Folder 1, California Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

¹² The Jonestown Institute, "Q1059-3 Transcript."

¹³ The Jonestown Institute, "Q1059-3 Transcript."

Former Peoples Temple member Garry Lambrev accepted Jones' claims to be God. "When he said that he was God, I didn't disbelieve him for a minute," Lambrev recalls. During the same interview with Leigh Fondakowski, Lambrev laments giving Jones so much power, despite the Reverend's good works and seemingly workable plan for a better society.¹⁴ Lambrev's words show that Jones had an incredible amount of influence over his followers during Peoples Temple's existence, even convincing members that he was God.

Journalists Tim Reiterman and John Jacobs also address Jones' claim to be God-like in their book *Raven: The Untold Story of the Rev. Jim Jones and His People*. The authors argue that Jones' health was failing, which left him weak and insecure. They continue,

In counterpoint to these insecurities, Jones began to build a cult around his own personality. He had seized on the notion of using a tangible personality on which to base the faith of his followers. Wrapped up in the notion was a philosophy that cut a fine line between atheism—the belief in no God—and a religious view Jones expressed in his earliest tracts—that God is simply the force of goodness and love in each person. In claiming to be the ultimate receptacle of good qualities, Jones began to promote himself as a fountain of faith. Subtly he encouraged his rank and file to see him in Christlike and Godlike terms.¹⁵

Not everyone voiced incredulity about Jones' to claim to have God-like abilities. Professor James Carley submitted a piece to the editor of the *Indianapolis Star* in 1971 to argue against the editor's criticisms of Jones' faith healing powers. "James Jones seems to me to have great qualities. His parapsychological powers are quite extraordinary. Naturally many people are inclined to approach evidence of extrasensory phenomena with skepticism—it is part of our training," writes Carley. However, Carley maintains that there is enough evidence to support Jones' claims, calling the Reverend a "prophet ... [of] some kind." He continues, "Obviously

¹⁴ Leigh Fondakowski, *Stories from Jonestown* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 36.

¹⁵ Reiterman and Jacobs, *Raven*, 74.

this man has some powers (not dissimilar to those of Jesus in the Biblical record) that are beyond those of most of us.”¹⁶ However, Carley’s position that Jones was a prophet with special abilities was in the minority. Many of Jones’ faith healing powers were later proven to be fraudulent, but at the time he convinced many believers that he had a unique gift to heal people.

The Beginnings of an Anti-Religious Message and “Apostolic Socialism”

Although Peoples Temple began as a Pentecostal church, “[Jones] took a path out of modern Pentecostalism, back to the radical ministry to Jesus and the communalism of apostolic Christianity,” writes John R. Hall.¹⁷ Jones claimed to practice “apostolic socialism” and he expected the members of Peoples Temple to follow suit. “By thus establishing a religious social movement, over the years Jones was able to align the intense form of religious zeal prevalent during the primitive Christian era with the central concerns of the modern age: race, class, and nuclear holocaust.” Hall continues, “Jim Jones and those who followed him established a movement that fused the central dilemmas of modern Christianity: personal salvation versus the social gospel, with the philosophical antithesis of Christianity, a “godless” yet prophetic version of communism.”¹⁸

In one sermon, Jones clarifies his plans for establishing an apostolic socialist model for his church:

Man in Crowd: Jim Jones has come to bring socialism to the United States of America. Hallelujah, hallelujah hallelujah!

¹⁶ “Jones’ Parapsychological Powers ‘Extraordinary,’ Carley Believes,” *Indianapolis Star*, December 22, 1971, MS 4125, Box 1, Folder 2, California Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

¹⁷ Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land*, 23.

¹⁸ Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land*, 303.

[*Many people shout*]

Jones: It's beautiful. It's beautiful. I would add one thing to it. *Christian* socialism. That's where you take them, that stage. You take them stage by stage. Or *apostolic* Christian socialism. Very beautiful.¹⁹

Later in the same sermon, Jones asked his followers to respond to his ideas about apostolic socialism. The following is one notable response:

Man in congregation: Behold, I have said unto thee. Give up thy capitalist ways. I have returned with my power and glory to build a new Jerusalem. Hallelujah.

Jones: Yes. To build a new heaven and new earth would probably be more sound theologically.²⁰

This brief exchange between Jones and his people shows Jones' plan to enact apostolic socialism within his church. The sermon also shows Jones' plan to build a "new Heaven and new Earth," indicating his skepticism about the promise of the traditional biblical Heaven and the possibility of remaining on Earth in its current state.

Not everyone agreed with Jones' radical religious beliefs. As early as 1965, Jones was targeted by nonbelievers to the point that he had to give up his Sunday radio program because of "harassment by telephone." The decision allegedly was Jones' and not WIBC's, for Jones wished to save the station embarrassment. "It all began, the Rev. Mr. Jones said, when he replied to a minister who had attacked the late Mahatma Gandhi, Hindu nationalist leader. He said Gandhi accepted the teachings of Jesus. He added that all the great religions of the world had something to offer." Jones explained, "I made a statement ... that I couldn't see a loving heavenly Father

¹⁹ Milmon F. Harrison, "Jones and Black Worship Traditions," in *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America*, eds. Rebecca Moore, Anthony B. Pinn, and Mary R. Sawyer (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), 133.

²⁰ Milmon F. Harrison, "Jones and Black Worship Traditions," 133.

condemning to hell persons because they wouldn't accept some Christian doctrines." After these comments, Jones was bombarded with telephone calls coming day and night to his home. "He says some nasty remarks were made on the phone concerning his views on racial matters, but these seemed secondary to the attacks on his theological views. One of the favorite tricks of the anonymous callers was to get one of the children on the phone and say: 'Did you know your father is an anti-Christ, a devil?'"²¹ This harassment shows that Jones' respect for other religions was not readily accepted by all members of the Indianapolis community.

Jones' recognition of teachings from all religions was not new to Peoples Temple. In 1953, a complimentary article about Jones praised his good works in the community. At the time, Peoples Temple was sponsored by the Methodist Church but Jones' church welcomed people of all beliefs. The unnamed author of the article "Student Minister Sponsors Drive to Aid South Side Area Juveniles" writes, "Originally, the Rev. Mr. Jones was to conduct only Sunday services. Instead, he has established an almost unheard of church program acceptable to all denominations. He preaches no doctrine, but moral lessons from the Bible. He has formed an ideal inter-community church, where no group is discriminated against, and each person's religious needs are fulfilled."²² Jones had a reputation for welcoming everyone into his church, regardless of religious affiliation. This was a radical mindset for a Pentecostal preacher, and would attract many followers of his Peoples Temple throughout the years.

²¹ Bill Wildhack, "Telephone Pests Silence Pastor," *Indianapolis News*, April 17, 1965, MS 4125, Box 3, California Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

²² "Student Minister Sponsors Drive to Aid South Side Area Juveniles," *Indianapolis Star*, February 28, 1953, MS 4125, Box 1, Folder 1, California Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

The Move to California and the Dissolution of Christianity in Peoples Temple

After Peoples Temple moved from Indianapolis to Ukiah and San Francisco, California, Jones' radical religious ideas intensified in the public sphere. Traditional Christian beliefs were replaced by Jones' personal beliefs, and praise of Jesus was replaced with praise for Jim Jones as the savior of Peoples Temple. Former Temple member Hue Fortson, Jr. recalls his time in Peoples Temple in San Francisco:

One of the main things we did not do was to pray for those in need. Instead, we tried to make sense of the situations that people were faced with. We took people to the passport office to complete their paperwork. We helped them move out of their apartments or houses. And most interesting on Sunday mornings, we still conducted services for those who were still coming, even after Jim Jones and the major portion of the group had gone south to Jonestown. We would hang a large picture of Jim Jones on the pulpit for the people to see and we would sing our made up songs. They were not songs about our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, but songs that had either had the words changed to fit into our brand of "new" religion/socialism/everyday life. There weren't any crosses within the stage area either, only that lone picture of Jim Jones with his sunglasses and that toucan bird.²³

Hue Fortson, Jr.'s statement illustrates Jones' placing himself at the head of the church. This action became more visible as pictures of Jones rather than traditional pictures of Jesus adorned the church. Therefore, Jones replaced Jesus as the savior of his people and was to be worshipped accordingly.

In 1972 Jones explicitly condemned organized religion. "I've sincerely and conscientiously ... not only attempted to prove, but I have proven that you cannot base your faith upon the Bible... If you have any doubts about that, I'd hit the floor," Jones said during one

²³ Hue Fortson, Jr., "My Life in the San Francisco Temple during the Jonestown Era," The Jonestown Institute, Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple, accessed July 23, 2015, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=34257.

address.²⁴ Jones expected his people to be skeptical about the Bible's message, believing that they should listen to his message instead. His incredulity about other people's abilities to accept the Bible as a source of faith was meant to shame Peoples Temple members in the hope that they would join in his disdain for the Bible.

Furthermore, Jones allegedly implored his followers to throw away their bibles. In an *Indianapolis Star* article by Carolyn Pickering dated September 23, 1972, the author examines one family's angry reaction to this request. "When this preacher Jones advised my aunt to throw away her Bible, we starting fighting," said the family of 70-year-old Edith Cordell. Cordell's family worried that Jones was preying on her, especially because the 70-year-old had only a fourth-grade education.²⁵ By removing the Bible from Peoples Temple, another visible shift had occurred. No longer were the teachings of God or Jesus at the head of the Temple, but Jim Jones and his personal philosophies and teachings. Journalists Tim Reiterman and John Jacobs write, "Step by step, Jones was leading his people to the conclusion that he was a prophet. They had seen him Christlike feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, inspiring compassionate deeds; they had witnessed his miraculous feats through the Holy Spirit. The people trusted him and stood in awe of him; they compromised themselves by accepting his destruction of the Bible."²⁶ This action shows Peoples Temple members' loyalty to Jones, who was moving closer to atheism and an anti-religious message.

Hyacinth Thrash, another former Peoples Temple member, also recalls Jones' dislike of the Bible. "In San Francisco ... he had me sell our big family Bible. Said it cost too much to ship

²⁴ The Jonestown Institute, "Q932 Transcript," Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple, accessed July 24, 2015, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=28323.

²⁵ Carolyn Pickering, "Family Pleads with Aged Aunt Not to 'Throw Away Her Bible,'" *Indianapolis Star*, September 23, 1972, MS 4125, Box 1, Folder 2, California Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

²⁶ Reiterman and Jacobs, *Raven*, 93.

to Guyana. The old people, some of them, kept their Bibles but didn't take them [out in public] once they got to Jonestown, for fear Jim'd take them away."²⁷ The fear Peoples Temple members had about Jones potentially seeing their Bibles exemplifies the Reverend's radicalism. This radicalism was present before the move to Jonestown, whereas many scholars argue that Jones began to shed his religious roots in favor of socialist teachings and atheism only once the group reached Guyana.

During a community meeting address given in Redwood Valley, California in 1973 Jones began to criticize capitalism and religion more explicitly than ever before:

If there were no rich, no poor, if everyone were equal, religion would be soon to disappear. People only develop religion when they're unhappy with this world... If this world were equal ... people would soon lose their religion ... People only make religion because this is so much a hell. They can't stand to look at this place... The earth is in the hands of the robber-baron rich. It's in the hands of the capitalists. Heaven was created by poor people that were working cotton fields and working in mines and living in hell, so they had to create a golden city somewhere. They had to dream, because they knew they'd never get anything out of this earth. So religion is a dark creation of those who are oppressed, those who are in bondage.²⁸

This speech exemplifies the radicalism of Jones' ideology. This passage, relayed to Jones' people before the move to Jonestown, is an explicit condemnation of traditional religion. His message also attacks capitalism and inequality of wealth in the United States. No longer was Jones interested in faith healing or making the world a better place through good works in society. Instead, Jones claimed that religion was a "dark creation of those who are oppressed," again creating an "us versus them" scenario in which Jones would be the lone savior of his

²⁷ Mary R. Sawyer, "The Church in Peoples Temple," in *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America*, eds. Rebecca Moore, Anthony B. Pinn, and Mary R. Sawyer (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), 177.

²⁸ The Jonestown Institute, "Q929 Transcript," *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, accessed July 23, 2015, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=27617.

people. The United States was now a hopeless case, according to Jones' pessimistic outlook on its capitalist society. The reactionary creation of religion by the "oppressed" was the outcome of this inequality, Jones claimed.

Jones continued to place himself as the instigator of change in society, once again attacking God and organized religion in a speech given in the mid-1970s:

Time's come to leave the ordinances of baptism and doctrines of laying on of hands, and hell and heaven, eternal judgment. Hebrews 6 says, leave the doctrines of baptism, resurrection of the dead, eternal judgment—that means hell and heaven—laying on of hands, and what does it say? Go on to perfection. And what's perfection? A society that controls its production... a society that controls its wealth, a society that controls its means of distribution, that's our perfection. Gettin' together. Sharing together. That's our perfection. And that's how we'll build heaven on earth... We do it ourselves... God not gone [sic] do it for us. Our mother and forefathers have died in their trespasses and their judgments. They've bonded, they've died at the wheel, they've died at their spinning wheel, they've died in the cotton fields, they've baked in the noonday sun, they've prayed... No God heard their prayer... No God heard your prayer in your ghettos when you were in need, no God heard you when your children were in drugs, no God heard you when your ... child was in trouble, no God heard you when you couldn't get enough money to keep your body and soul together from the welfare, but I came along, Jim Jones, nigger, I came along, and now there's a change being made.²⁹

Again, Jones positioned himself as the savior of Peoples Temple who would enact change separate from the society of the United States. He claimed God did not hear the prayers of his followers and so Heaven had to be created on Earth. Jones assured his followers that he would lead the way in moving from reliance on the Bible and biblical teachings to the creation of a socialist utopia in Jonestown, Guyana.

²⁹ The Jonestown Institute, "Q1059-3 Transcript."

Jones' Religious Doubts

The Reverend Jim Jones had major doubts about the teachings of the Bible. Jones left very few self-penned works, preferring to give recorded sermons, but did leave one telling document. An undated pamphlet discovered after his death titled “The Letter Killeth, but the Spirit Giveth Life” was a 24-page indictment of the Bible. The goal of writing the pamphlet was to point out inconsistencies and errors within the Bible as well as heinous acts committed by God. Although there also exists a section on the “Great Truths of in the Bible,” most of the booklet is devoted to the negative aspects of the book. Jones titled his chapters “Absurdities,” “Atrocities,” and “Indecencies,” for example.³⁰ Religious Studies Professor David Chidester writes that Jones’ pamphlet was meant to “amplify upon what [Jones] regarded as the errors, lies, and silly stories of the Bible. The letter kills, the Bible kills, this text of subclassification kills, Jones insisted, but the spirit of a socialist revolution, overthrowing the subclassifications of racism, slavery, sexism, and poverty, promised to give life.”³¹ This work shows Jones’ skepticism about the Bible, particularly in the years immediately preceding his death. Furthermore, this writing represents Jones’ religious radicalism, as he no longer used the Bible as a tool for teaching, but as an example of a text to be scrutinized and criticized.

Jones also physically displayed his disdain for the Bible. According to Chidester, “Occasionally in his sermons, Jones would spit on the [King James Bible], throw the Bible on the floor, jump up and down on it, and declare that the letter kills.”³² These actions show how far Jones had moved away from his early Pentecostal training in Indianapolis. No longer could

³⁰ Jim Jones, “The Letter Killeth, but the Spirit Giveth Life,” MS 4125, Box 1, Folder 11, California Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

³¹ Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide*, 64.

³² Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide*, 64.

Peoples Temple be called a traditional Christian congregation. Peoples Temple had transformed into something different: a subversive counterculture movement or anti-religion socialist movement with Jim Jones leading the way.

End Times

Most interpretations of the end of Peoples Temple consider the deaths in Jonestown reactionary. The deaths of Peoples Temple members followed the murders of visiting California State Representative Leo Ryan and members of his entourage. However, I argue that Jim Jones was preoccupied with the end times, similar to other twentieth-century “millennial” groups or “doomsday cults.” According to an article titled “Death in Guyana,” published in the *Sacramento Bee* a few days after the mass murder-suicides that occurred November 18, 1978, the deaths were a “gruesomely orchestrated fulfillment of Rev. Jones’ doomsday prophecies.” The unnamed author frets over the intense loyalty Peoples Temple members demonstrated for Jim Jones.³³ This loyalty had been shown for years, as members participated in “white nights,” or “suicide drills,” to prove their loyalty to Jones and to show their disdain for capitalism and “inhumane conditions” in the United States.

Jones had exhibited his fear of the end times during the Temple’s move from Indianapolis to Ukiah, California. In 1965, Jones reportedly read an article on nuclear war in *Esquire Magazine*. This article led Jones to conclude that the world would end July 15, 1967, and so he began to look for a new home for his Peoples Temple, safe from nuclear holocaust.³⁴ In an article

³³ “Death in Guyana,” *Sacramento Bee*, November 21, 1978, Denise Stephenson, ed., *Dear People: Remembering Jonestown* (Berkeley, CA: Heyday Books, 2005), 3.

³⁴ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 106.

dated September 24, 1972 the newspaper reported that Jones moved the Peoples Temple congregation because Ukiah “looked like a safe place.” In the same article, Jones claimed, “I have never prophesied the end of the world. Where that came from I’d be interested in finding out ... I’m not that fatalistic.” The unnamed interviewer continues, “Do you think we might one day blow it up?” to which Jones answers, “No, I’m a hopeless idealist.”³⁵ This statement would prove to be untrue, as Jones was not a “hopeless idealist,” but rather a pessimistic fatalist who would destroy Peoples Temple by poisoning over 900 men, women, children, and even animals present in Jonestown.

The same year the *San Francisco Bee* article was published, Jones spoke of the end times and what would happen to his congregation. “We’re gonna live together, or we’re going to die together,” Jones proclaimed in one sermon. “Here’s where heaven’s gonna have to be made. We’ll make a heaven out of this place, or it’ll be a hell. And if we don’t make a heaven out of this place, nobody in the universe is going to trust us to go to another planet or another heaven, whichever you choose, when we’ve made such a mess of this, and we won’t get our minds concerned about political government.”³⁶ This sermon shows that already in 1972, a few years before the move to Jonestown, Jones thought about the end times. He relayed to his followers that they were a unit that would either flourish together or be destroyed together. The sermon also illustrates Jones’ disillusionment with the Bible’s promise of an afterlife. Instead, Jones emphasized making his utopian dream the heaven his followers sought.

Jones ended Peoples Temple on November 18, 1978 cataclysmically. Over 900 of his followers drank cyanide-poisoned Flavor-Aid that day after the murders of visiting California

³⁵ “Pastor’s Own Story of His Temple Life,” *San Francisco Sunday Examiner & Chronicle*, September 24, 1972, MS 4125, Box 1, Folder 2, California Historical Society, San Francisco, California.

³⁶ The Jonestown Institute, “Q932 Transcript.”

Representative Leo Ryan and his entourage allegedly at the hands of Peoples Temple members. Some of Jones' followers were coerced into taking the poison, but many drank it willingly, displaying their faith in Jones until the very end.

Aftermath and Questions Raised

After November 18, 1978, people began to question what had truly transpired in Jonestown, and whether it could be called Christianity. Evangelist Billy Graham wrote in the *New York Times* after the deaths, "One may speak of the Jones situation as that of a cult, but it would be a sad mistake to identify it in any way with Christianity. It is true that he came from a religious background but what he did and how he thought have no relationship to the views and teachings of any legitimate form of historic Christianity..."³⁷ Likewise, Michael Novak wrote in the *Washington Star*, "If Jonestown was a religious colony, why did it have no church, no chapel, no place of prayer? ... The religion of Jonestown was explicitly and unequivocally socialism, not Christianity. The cult in Jonestown was socialism..."³⁸ These enquiries about the legitimacy of the group as a Christian church were mostly raised after the deaths of the Peoples Temple members. Before the deaths, only a few people, most notably the Concerned Relatives organization, made up of family members and friends of Peoples Temple members, questioned what was truly happening in Jonestown after reports of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse and detainment emerged.

³⁷ Billy Graham, "On the Devil in Mr. Jones," *New York Times*, December 5, 1978, Denise Stephenson, ed., *Dear People: Remembering Jonestown* (Berkeley, CA: Heyday Books, 2005), 7.

³⁸ Michael Novak, "Jonestown: Socialism at Work," *Washington Star*, December 17, 1978, Denise Stephenson, ed., *Dear People: Remembering Jonestown* (Berkeley, CA: Heyday Books, 2005), 8.

Peoples Temple, for the most part, went undisturbed by outsiders and the government. Because the group called itself a religion, and religious tolerance is considered an important right in the United States, Peoples Temple fell under that protection. “Our courts are reluctant, and rightly so, to try to protect people from fanatical cults that seem to rob them, in the name of religion, of their ability to make decisions in their own interest,” explains an unnamed author of an article in the *San Diego Union* penned four days after the deaths at Jonestown.³⁹ Jones complained of religious persecution years before the massacre, even though Peoples Temple could no longer really be called a religion, at least not in the traditional sense. Peoples Temple was not a Christian church in the years before its end, more closely resembling a subversive counterculture movement with socialism as its true religion and Jim Jones as its God.

Others expressed similar sentiments about the necessity of religious freedom but also the need to investigate these groups in the United States. “The lesson for the young in this tragic affair is that there are no answers in false gods,” the anonymous author of an article in the *New York Post* proclaims. “The lessons for parents and the rest of us is, that it is time for a federal investigation of the many sects now promising so much, but providing so little, and many with large tax exemptions.”⁴⁰ Peoples Temple fell into this group. Jones promised his followers much over the years. He did not always deliver these promises, but managed to remain undisturbed because Peoples Temple advertised itself as a religious group.

³⁹ “A Message in Massacre,” *San Diego Union*, November 22, 1978, Denice Stephenson, ed., *Dear People: Remembering Jonestown* (Berkeley, CA: Heyday Books, 2005), 5.

⁴⁰ “Guyana Horror Story,” *New York Post*, November 21, 1978, Denice Stephenson, ed., *Dear People: Remembering Jonestown* (Berkeley, CA: Heyday Books, 2005), 4.

“Doomsday Cults” and “Millennial Groups”

Peoples Temple could not rightly be called a Christian religion by the end of its existence. Rather, Peoples Temple more closely resembled self-destructive groups that followed. “Doomsday cults,” or “millennial groups” were particularly prevalent in the 1990s as the millennium approached. These movements included groups such as Aum Shinrikyo and Heaven’s Gate. Both groups had a charismatic figurehead at the top of their group’s structure and ended their movement’s existence violently through their version of Armageddon, much like Jim Jones did in Jonestown decades earlier. Peoples Temple combined the presence of an unchallenged, controlling, charismatic leader at the top of the group and a preoccupation with end times, making Peoples Temple a particularly dangerous model of religious movement from the start. While I have not and will not be using the word “cult” to describe Peoples Temple, the group, particularly in the mid-to-late 1970s, did possess characteristics similar to the following “doomsday cults” or “millennial groups.”

Aum Shinrikyo was a Japanese “doomsday cult” led by Shoko Asahara. This “millennial group” is known for executing a sarin gas attack in a Tokyo subway March 20, 1995, killing twelve people and injuring many others. After a police raid on the group’s headquarters, the discovery was made that Aum Shinrikyo was stockpiling poisons such as sodium cyanide, presumably to be used in other chemical warfare attacks.⁴¹

Aum Shinrikyo shared similarities with Peoples Temple. Like Jim Jones, Aum leader Shoko Ashara was consumed by paranoia and the belief that his group was being persecuted by the United States, the Jews, and the Freemasons. Also, as in the case of Jones’ Peoples Temple,

⁴¹ Marc Galanter, *Cults: Faith, Healing, and Coercion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 172-173.

former members and family members of Aum Shinrikyo wrote to newspapers that the group “alienated young people from their families, coercively acquired financial assets from its members, and raised large sums of money by questionable means.”⁴² Both Peoples Temple and Aum Shinrikyo were also politically involved in society. While Jim Jones sat on housing commission boards and Peoples Temple canvassed for liberal politicians, Aum Shinrikyo members formed a political party in 1990 called Shinrito (Supreme Truth Party). Also like Jones, Aum Shinrikyo’s followers saw their leader as “the living Buddha, the Christ, whose assertions and prophecies were infallible.”⁴³ Shoko Ashara and his followers became increasingly more concerned about the end times: “With armageddon increasingly imminent, and the outside world believed to be totally evil and seeking to destroy Aum, it became imperative to inhibit internal dissent and prevent defections. Salvation was found only within Aum Shinrikyo,” writes Religious Studies professor Catherine Wessinger.⁴⁴

Shoko Ashara’s preoccupation with the end times resulted in violence March 20, 1995 with a sarin gas attack in a Tokyo subway. Aum Shinrikyo’s goal had been to create Shambhala, the Buddhist millennial kingdom. Ashara predicted that Armageddon would occur in 1999. This prediction was later changed to 1997 and then 1995, which had the effect of “increasing the commitment and fervor of Aum devotees, but it also meant that armageddon *had* to occur.” Wessinger writes, “According to his own teachings, the Buddha Ashara could not err in his prophecies. If Ashara’s predictions proved false, then the whole Aum Shinrikyo edifice would

⁴² Catherine Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven’s Gate* (New York: Seven Bridges Press, LLC, 2000), 138-139.

⁴³ Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently*, 139.

⁴⁴ Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently*, 140.

crumble.”⁴⁵ Therefore, the inner circle of the group decided to bring about their own Armageddon through violence with the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway.

This group shares characteristics with Jim Jones’ Peoples Temple: preoccupation with end times, leadership by a God-like figurehead, and detainment of those who wished to leave the group. Fear and paranoia ruled the groups, which ultimately resulted in violent acts. Wessinger attributes the violence committed by Aum Shinrikyo to “a lack of monitoring by law enforcement agents, internal weaknesses within Aum, and Aum members’ sense of being in conflict with eternal opponents.” These factors led the group to commit a violent act in order to “protect their ultimate concern, the creation of the Buddhist millennial kingdom, Shambhala.”⁴⁶ Aum Shinrikyo, like Peoples Temple, was recognized as a religion, despite having been rejected the first time Aum applied for the status in Japan.⁴⁷ As recognized religions, the groups were allowed to operate relatively undisturbed or unquestioned by officials, even though they were stockpiling dangerous materials and planning an apocalyptic end.

Heaven’s Gate, a group based in Rancho Santa Fe, California, also displayed the characteristics of a “doomsday cult” or a “millennial group.” Thirty-nine followers’ bodies were discovered in a mansion in Rancho Santa Fe, California on March 26, 1997, an act orchestrated by Heaven’s Gate leader Marshall Applewhite. This act of mass suicide resulted in the largest number of suicides in the United States committed at the same time.⁴⁸ The group believed the late Bonnie Lu Nettles, co-leader of Heaven’s Gate, would be “piloting a flying saucer” behind the Hale-Bopp comet, which was nearing Earth. Applewhite’s followers maintained that through suicide they would be reunited with Nettles, leaving Earth behind as they entered the “Next

⁴⁵ Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently*, 142-143.

⁴⁶ Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently*, 120-121.

⁴⁷ Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently*, 138.

⁴⁸ Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently*, 229.

Level,” or the “Kingdom of God.”⁴⁹ The followers died from a mixture of vodka and phenobarbital, coupled with assistance from fellow members who pulled plastic bags over the dying’s faces. The bodies were found under purple shrouds, dressed in black pants and shirts with “Heaven’s Gate Away Team” printed on them. Each member had an overnight bag filled with clothes, notebooks, and lip balm. The dead also had five dollars in bills and coins in their front shirt pockets.⁵⁰

Like Jim Jones, Marshall Applewhite claimed to be the prophet and savior of the group. “As true today as it was 2000 years ago, no one gets to my Father or enters the Kingdom of Heaven except through me,” Applewhite wrote. “There is no other Son of His or Representative from his Kingdom incarnate. Connecting with that Kingdom occurs only while a member is incarnate, as I am today.”⁵¹ The group left two “exit videos,” one called “Planet about to be Recycled: Your Only Chance to Survive—Leave with Us,” the other titled “Last Chance to Evacuate Earth before It’s Recycled.”⁵² This sense of urgency echoes the deaths in Jonestown on November 18, 1978. Jones also pushed his followers into committing suicide by arguing that moving onto a different plane would be the best option for his followers.

These groups resemble the end of Jim Jones’ Peoples Temple Agricultural Project, or Jonestown. The self-destructive and violent nature of Aum Shinrikyo and Heaven’s Gate initiate a conversation about “doomsday cults” or “millennial groups,” categories in which Peoples Temple could be placed.

⁴⁹ Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently*, 230, 243.

⁵⁰ Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently*, 231.

⁵¹ Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently*, 243.

⁵² Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently*, 246.

Chapter 3: Communism, Marxism, and Socialism: Radical Politics and Jim Jones

Background

Although in many ways outwardly similar to a traditional Pentecostal church, Peoples Temple from the start contained radical political elements. Reverend Jim Jones, a loyal supporter of Marxism, communism, and socialism, used Peoples Temple as a cover to promote his radical agenda, claiming during Peoples Temple's later years to have infiltrated the church with his unorthodox beliefs. I argue that these radical ideas formed before Jones established Peoples Temple and persisted until the very last day of its existence, moving closer to the forefront with each passing year. Jones' early sermons contained communalist and socialist ideas with occasional mention of Karl Marx's ideas. After migrating to California, Peoples Temple became more active politically as Jones spoke out against capitalism and began to push a more radical agenda. By the time the group migrated to Jonestown, Jones actively pursued his socialist dream, establishing a commune in the jungles of Guyana. Jones implored his followers to commit to his radical plans as well through participation in socialist classes and his addresses. November 18, 1978, the day of the mass murder-suicides in Jonestown, Jones proclaimed that the act was to protest capitalism, fascism, and other perceived evils in the United States. I argue that resentment against the United States and Jones' radical ideology had been present for many years before the end of Jonestown.

Communalism in Religious Organizations

Modern socialism emerged in early 19th-century Europe as a response to wealth disparity created by industrialization and urbanization. Some members of society welcomed capitalism but others dissented, leading them to socialist philosophies. Rather than individualism, the socialists emphasized collectivism, working for the greater good within their communities, and cooperation. The socialists were concerned with unequal distribution of wealth. When peasant wages fell the workers moved into urban areas and took low-paying jobs. These concerns led socialist thinkers such as Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, and Robert Owen to build the ideas behind utopian communes that would emphasize “harmony, association, and cooperation” through communal living and working.¹ These communes existed long before Reverend Jim Jones would build Jonestown in the jungles of Guyana; therefore Jones’ utopian dream was not a new one, but rather part of an experimental socialist lineage conceived at least a century earlier.

Aristocrat Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825) was greatly influenced by the French Revolution of 1789. Like Jones, Saint-Simon was interested in social justice. The French philosopher believed that the semi-feudal relationship that still existed in Europe in the early 19th-century was a problem. Saint-Simon’s goals were to “eradicate poverty and to ensure that all benefited from education and employment,”² goals Jones agreed were important to pursue in a socialist commune. Saint-Simon also argued that “all men ought to work” in response to the disparity between the “workers” and the “idlers (a group in society who lived off of their wealth

¹ Michael Newman, *Socialism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 6-7.

² Newman, *Socialism*, 7.

without contributing to production or distribution of goods),”³ a statement Jones supported, as all of the members of Jonestown worked to sustain the commune in Jonestown.

Charles Fourier (1772-1837) took a slightly different approach to the problems of society, blaming the “stifling impact of current society, which was the primary cause of human misery.” Michael Newman argues that Fourier’s utopian commune, Harmony, had more ideologically in common with the communes of the 1960s than did Saint-Simon’s philosophies. Fourier’s commune focused more on “feelings, passion, and sexuality” than did earlier communes, or phalanxes, as he called them.⁴ Fourier also believed that schools should be community-based; that is, they should have no teachers or students, but should be implemented through a more natural process.⁵ Fourier was less interested in wealth disparity and class division than other socialist thinkers.⁶ He believed communities should have three classes, including the rich, who would help finance the community as shareholders. However, Fourier believed that there would be no animosity among these class divisions because “their primary cause—poverty—would be absent.” According to Fourier’s socialist philosophy, these three groups would work together and have the same educational system, which would lead to “commonality of language and manners.”⁷ In this way, Fourier’s ideas differed from other socialist thinkers’ philosophies, yet he was an important founder of utopian communal thought.

Similar to Fourier, Robert Owen (1771-1858) blamed society for individuals’ ills. More motivated to enact change than his predecessors, Fourier purchased land in Indiana for his

³ Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, trans. by Edward Averling, (1880; repr., New York, NY: International Publishers, 2004), 31.

⁴ Newman, *Socialism*, 10.

⁵ David Leopold, “Education and Utopia: Robert Owen and Charles Fourier,” *Oxford Review of Education* 37, no. 5 (October 2011): 619, accessed July 15, 2015, <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=e4abf5c9-d930-4121-8906-2dbf596cc8de%40sessionmgr4005&vid=1&hid=4201>.

⁶ Newman, *Socialism*, 10.

⁷ Leopold, “Education and Utopia,” 628-629.

commune, New Harmony, where he hoped to experiment with utopianism. Owen criticized the way societies operated, blaming them for promoting “selfish and superstitious ways” in its people. He believed these negative qualities in individuals could be transformed through changes in the ways children were raised, relationships between the sexes, and the organization of work patterns.⁸ Owen began to attack the outside system of private property and profit, also a theme common in Jones’ speeches. Michael Newman argues that Owen’s emphasis on nurture rather than nature became an important facet of socialist thought in the years to come.⁹ Furthermore, Owen also believed that society needed “drastic reformation” and that marriage, the church, and private property prevented the establishment of a new society, one based on a new moral order. Integral to this new moral order was a “proper environment” with a “suitable educational program.” Owen also stressed that man’s beliefs and character were “determined *for* him through his environment and not *by* him through his personal endeavors alone.”¹⁰ These ideas differ from Fourier’s, as Owen “saw character as plastic and open to creation” and Fourier “saw it as God-given and liable to discovery.”¹¹ Owen’s beliefs were closer to Jones’ ideas than Fourier’s, stressing the importance of creating an environment rich with educational programs in which community members could reach their full potential.

Influenced by these socialist thinkers, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848. In his article “Marxism,” Joshua Muravchik contends that Engels took inspiration from the work of Robert Owen.¹² Engels writes in *Socialism: Utopian and*

⁸ Newman, *Socialism*, 10-11.

⁹ Newman, *Socialism*, 14.

¹⁰ Donald F. Carmony and Josephine M. Elliott, “New Harmony, Indiana: Robert Owen’s Seedbed for Utopia,” *Indiana Magazine of History*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (September 1980): 163, accessed November 6, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27790455>.

¹¹ Leopold, “Education and Utopia,” 619.

¹² Joshua Muravchik, “Marxism,” *Foreign Policy* no. 133 (November-December 2002): 36, accessed June 25, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3183551>.

Scientific that socialism “in its theoretical form ... originally appears ostensibly as a more logical extension of the principles laid down by the great French philosophers of the eighteenth century,”¹³ showing the lineage of socialist thought moving through Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Furthermore, Engels argues that these socialist philosophers were “extreme revolutionists.”¹⁴ If we are to accept Engel’s definition of “extreme revolutionists,” then it follows that Jim Jones, a self-proclaimed socialist, would also fall into this category.

Marxist Definitions

Before a discussion of Jim Jones and his radical political ideology can commence, Marx and Engels’ version of communist thought warrants clarification. The authors of *The Communist Manifesto* claimed, “a specter is haunting Europe—the specter of communism,” and called for similar thinkers to come forth with their ideas.¹⁵ In their manifesto, Marx and Engels argue that class struggles between the “oppressor and the oppressed” have caused major problems in society throughout history.¹⁶ However, they believed that as capitalism grew, the numbers of the impoverished workers would grow and the numbers of the wealthy business owners would shrink. Muravchik posits, “This dynamic would make revolution morally necessary and politically possible.” Marx and Engels predicted an uprising of the working class against the bourgeoisie. The proletariat would win the battle and a classless society would result. This

¹³ Engels, *Socialism*, 38.

¹⁴ Engels, *Socialism*, 38.

¹⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. by Samuel Moore, (1848; repr., New York: Simon & Schuster, 1964).

¹⁶ Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 57-58.

theory did not come to fruition as the middle class expanded and the wealthy remained powerful. Still, the allure of Marxism has persisted to the present.¹⁷

Jones took Marx and Engel's radical political ideas and distorted them, promoting them as his self-proclaimed "own brand": "I shall call myself a Marxist, because no one taught me my brand of Marxism. I read, I listened."¹⁸ Jones' declaration indicates that the reverend did not follow Marx and Engels' ideology exactly. Although concerned with wealth disparity, Jones did not speak of an uprising by the poor, as Marx and Engels did. Instead, Jones took a more defeatist position. He instilled hopelessness in his congregation, claiming there could be no escape from the perceived evils of capitalism in the United States. Therefore, while Jones took inspiration from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *The Communist Manifesto*, calling his "brand" of philosophy Marxism, it did not adhere to all of the traditional tenets of communist radical thought or the intentions of the authors' ideas. In 1972, Jones proclaimed, "Man can evolve. Man can grow up till he can be trusted. That's what we're saying. The perfection of man. Christians say it, but they don't believe. [Karl] Marx said it. He said man is capable of perfection. Christians say, that you must be perfect like God is. Jesus said, be ye perfect, even as... I and the heavenly father are perfect¹⁹ (Matthew 5:48, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect)."²⁰ This quotation indicates that Jones drew inspiration from Marx, incorporating Marxist rhetoric within his sermons.

Jones' version of Marxism has raised much criticism. John R. Hall, author of *Gone from the Promised Land: Jonestown in American Cultural History*, writes, "From the standpoint of

¹⁷ Muravchik, "Marxism," 36-37.

¹⁸ John R. Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land: Jonestown in American Cultural History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2004), 26.

¹⁹ The Jonestown Institute, "Transcript Q932," Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple, accessed May 18, 2015, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=27618.

²⁰ King James Version.

Marxists, Jones could best be described as a ‘crude communist’ who had little theoretical understanding of the labor theory of value, class conflict, or a host of other issues that Marxists use as touchstones for their debates and strategies.”²¹ Journalist Steve Rose calls Jones an “emotional Marxist,” writing that “Marxism was, for [Jones], a means of polarizing the world into Good and Bad;”²² that is, capitalists and non-capitalists. Mark Lane, author of *The Strongest Poison*, remarks, “From my one philosophical and political exchange with Jones, I had concluded that his scholarship in Marxist ideology was so deficient that he might have experienced difficulty in distinguishing between the words of Karl Marx and Groucho Marx.”²³ These assessments of Jones’ understanding of Marxism are critical, showing that Jones did indeed invent his “own brand” of radical political ideology that took inspiration from Marx and Engels but could not be called Marxism in the traditional sense.

Jim Jones’ Political Ideology before Peoples Temple

The Communist Party, an important part of Jones’ life even before the formation of Peoples Temple, influenced Jones’ radical beliefs. Jones joined the CPUSA (Communist Party USA) during the McCarthy era,²⁴ although there is debate over whether or not he was a “card-carrying member.” His wife, Marceline Jones, recalled that at the time of their marriage in 1949 Jim Jones was already a committed communist.²⁵ Although harassed for their show of support for the radical ideology, the Joneses continued to attend Communist rallies during the peak of the

²¹ Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land*, 26.

²² Steve Rose, *Jesus and Jim Jones* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1979), 62.

²³ Mark Lane, *The Strongest Poison* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1980), 106.

²⁴ Rebecca Moore, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2009), 20.

²⁵ David Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide: Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003), 4.

McCarthy era.²⁶ Historian David Chidester remarks in *Salvation and Suicide: Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown*, “During the McCarthy era of the 1950s, Jones called himself a Maoist but still identified with Stalin and the Soviet Union; [Jones] ‘died a thousand deaths’ when the Rosenbergs were executed, executions he saw as an indictment of the American system, ‘an inhumane system that kills people based on a bunch of scrap paper, just because they had Communist affiliations.’”²⁷ By the 1950s, Jones already questioned anti-communist sentiments in the United States and made his radical beliefs public. According to Hall, Jones claimed to be “enamored of Stalin” because of the Soviet leader’s stand against the Nazis during the Second World War.²⁸ This sentiment shows Jones’ support for the Communist Party and its leaders in the post-World War II era.

Early exposure to the Communist Party and radical thinking led Jones to conclusions about “the evils” of capitalism in the United States and the actions he could take to steer his members away from pro-capitalist thought. Chidester writes, “Perceiving socialism as an alternative to vast economic inequities, Jones later recalled that his sense of compassion led him to reject the American system of capitalism. ‘It seemed gross to me that one human being would have so much more than another,’ Jones recounted. ‘I couldn’t come to terms with capitalism in any way.’”²⁹ In statements written in the late 1970s the Reverend Jones mused, “I decided, *how* can I demonstrate my Marxism? The thought was ‘infiltrate the church.’ I consciously made a decision to look into that prospect.”³⁰ John R. Hall explains Jones’ rationale concerning using the church as a vehicle to promote his radical agenda:

²⁶ Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land*, 17.

²⁷ Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide*, 4-5.

²⁸ Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land*, 13.

²⁹ Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide*, 4.

³⁰ Jim Jones, “Jim’s Commentary about Himself, 1977-1978,” The Jonestown Institute, *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, accessed May 16, 2015, <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/JJAutobio1.pdf>.

Thus came Jim Jones' first and greatest deception: using the cover of a church to preach that religion was 'the opiate of the people.' In the United States, serious discussion of socialism effectively has been excluded from mainstream media, and the subject has become virtually taboo for the population at large. One of Jones' converts, Tim Carter, explained, 'Telling people about socialism in America, you'd get 20 people. But as a preacher you could get a large audience.' In semipublic services in the early 1970s, as a sort of bait to the interested, Jones would allude to deeper truths than those he was presenting, much as gnostics and mystics had done before him. By the mid-1970s, he became more and more explicit about his socialist vision... The deception of using religion to promote socialism dissipated for followers as they came to know their leader more intimately, but the persistence of the church front sustained a public relations façade that legitimated the group within established society and attracted support of politicians and other notables, many of whom might otherwise have steered clear of the socialist messiah.³¹

Therefore, while religious tenets existed within Peoples Temple, Jones planned to push his radical agenda onto his followers even before the formation of the church in the mid-1950s. Posing as a purely Christian church was an ideal hiding place for a radical group such as Peoples Temple. Jones recognized this strategy and actively pursued it.

Radical Ideology of Peoples Temple in Indianapolis

Jones' radical ideas, present from the start of his career as a preacher, came to the forefront as years passed. Jones recalls, "In the early years I approached Christendom from a communal standpoint with only intermittent mention of my Marxist views. However in later years there was not ever a person who attended my meetings that did not hear me say I was a Communist. And that is what is very strange that all these years I survived without being exposed."³² This comment shows that Jones' Peoples Temple began as an insular, private church

³¹ Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land*, 144-145.

³² Jones, "Jim's Commentary about Himself."

in which its members accepted his distortion of Marxism in exchange for the non-secular message many followers came to hear.

Furthermore, Jones used biblical passages to support his communist and socialist message. He often cited from the New Testament, relaying to his followers, “Distribution was made unto every man according as he had need” (Acts 4:35).³³ By using the Bible as support for Jones’ radical agenda, the Reverend convinced the more religious members of Peoples Temple to believe that positive aspects of socialism and communism could find a place within a religious group.

In a sermon given in Indianapolis most likely in 1957 or 1958, Jones already gave praise to communism and its leaders:

In just 40 years’ time, Communism has arisen. It’s a challenge to God’s people. It has its own Bible, dialectic materialism. It has its Messiah, Karl Marx. It has its prophets, the Khrushchevs ... You don’t want to write him off. Don’t want to write him off, because certainly he’s a talented man of great ability, and the Soviets are way beyond us in scope, beyond our imagination in scientific development.”³⁴

Already Jones was pushing his radical agenda by communicating to Peoples Temple members the greatness of the Communist Party and the advancements the Party had made in the Soviet Union.

Jones continued this sermon by tearing down Jesus in favor of the communists. He claimed Jesus was “out with the drunks, out with the harlots, out in the red light district in the back alley, out...dining with...sinners, because they called him a winebibber and a glutton, didn’t they?” This vitriol most likely referenced Luke 7:34 (“The Son of man is come eating and

³³ King James Bible.

³⁴ The Jonestown Institute, “Q1058-2 Transcript,” Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple, accessed June 4, 2015, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=28034.

drinking; and ye say, Behold a gluttonous man, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners!”³⁵ Jones continues, “We are all holier than thou, I tell you, I’ve got as much use for him, why, you know before I’d join some of these outfits, before I’d join some of these Pentecostal outfits, I’d join the Communist Party and say Hail Stalin... I’m so sick of it, I believe a Communist’ll have a better chance of gettin’ through than this so-called pack of wolves that call themselves the Church of God.”³⁶ This sermon exemplifies Jones’ radical beliefs and shows that he was not keeping his communist ideology hidden but passing his beliefs onto his followers as early as Peoples Temple’s time in Indianapolis.

Peoples Temple’s Political Involvement in California

Jones’ desire for political involvement in society became more apparent after Peoples Temple’s move to California in the 1960s. In one sermon given in 1972, Jones proclaimed, “We say, oh the church shouldn’t have anything to do with government. Oh, yes it should, the government is upon his shoulders. We have to get involved with politics... It’s your duty.”³⁷ This statement marks a major shift as Jones called on his members to actively pursue political endeavors.

Jones’ call to action was realized in San Francisco, California. Peoples Temple members mobilized in large numbers for liberal candidates, including mayoral candidate George Moscone. This support for a politician was one of the first instances during which the public began to see Peoples Temple not only as a church but as an active political force. Long-standing Peoples

³⁵ King James Bible.

³⁶ The Jonestown Institute, “Q1058-2 Transcript.”

³⁷ The Jonestown Institute, “Q932 Transcript.”

Temple members had listened to Jones' radical ideology and push for political involvement for years, so the shift from isolated church to political activism in the public sphere did not surprise them.³⁸ Grateful to Jones and his followers for their involvement in the community, Moscone relayed the following to the Reverend:

Your contributions to the spiritual health and well-being of our community have been truly inestimable, and I am heartened by the fact that we can continue to expect such vigorous and creative leadership from the Peoples Temple in the future. By your tireless efforts on behalf of all San Franciscans, you have demonstrated that the unique powers of spiritual energy and civic commitment are virtually boundless, and that our lives would be sadly diminished without your continuing contributions.³⁹

After the election of Moscone, which many people have attributed to the help of Peoples Temple members, the congregation began to be recognized on the political scene. During the 1976 political campaign, Jones and an entourage of approximately fifteen bodyguards met with Rosalynn Carter, wife of Democratic Party candidate Jimmy Carter. Jones, "looking more like a country-and-western singer than a minister," was also present to greet and meet with Walter Mondale when the vice-presidential candidate arrived in San Francisco in 1976.⁴⁰ Jones implored his followers to vote for Democratic presidential candidate George McGovern in 1972, stating in a sermon that McGovern was "one of the better ones. I'd say that of all the lesser evil, all of you—you got your right mind—will vote for McGovern at this particular juncture. I don't like to choose between the lesser of, of devils, or opportunities or alternatives, but it's realistic." He continues, "Humpty Dumpty" [Hubert Humphrey] would've been a better candidate than

³⁸ Moore, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, 29-30.

³⁹ "Peoples Temple Endorsements Packet," The Jonestown Institute, *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, accessed July 9, 2015, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=18355.

⁴⁰ Tim Reiterman and John Jacobs, *Raven: The Untold Story of the Rev. Jim Jones and His People* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 1982), 302-303.

“Tricky Dick” [Richard Nixon].⁴¹ Although Jones increased his political involvement, he still had suspicions about the candidates, even the liberal ones.

Jones also increased his public visibility in politics after his appointment to the San Francisco Housing Committee as a member and later as its chair by Moscone.⁴² In exchange for this appointment, Moscone utilized members of Peoples Temple, a group of ““hundreds of people from the church at [Moscone’s] disposal at a moment’s notice, [who were] knocking on doors, packing rallies, papering the entire city with posters and flyers. It was zero-cost, total effectiveness,”” journalist Phil Tracy explains in an interview with Leigh Fondakowski,⁴³ Peoples Temple members heeded Jones’ call to action, influencing politics in California with their large numbers.

Jones and his followers also became activists for social causes in California. In an article printed in the *San Francisco Chronicle* September 4, 1970, the author writes of Peoples Temples’ efforts to raise money for the families of policemen killed in the line of duty. Jones proclaimed the following:

We are utterly horrified by this move to murder police all over this nation... It’s high time that we let people know that not everyone who is opposed to the war and for social justice hates policemen... We quit marching long ago. We feel positive activism is the only way to achieve change now. We’ve been threatened by extremists ourselves. But violence like this is utter insanity. It’s time we do something, or else we’re going to esd [sic] up with state fascism.⁴⁴

⁴¹ The Jonestown Institute, “Q932 Transcript.”

⁴² Moore, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, 30.

⁴³ Leigh Fondakowski, *Stories from Jonestown* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 111.

⁴⁴ “Anti-War Church Tries Another Way,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 4, 1970, MS 4125, Box 1, Folder 2, California Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

These achievements show that members of Peoples Temple immersed themselves in political and social causes throughout the years. Under Jones' direction, his followers believed the church should take an active role in politics. Jones attained his goal of leading political and social involvement by placing himself in the same group as the oppressed, warning listeners of a potential fascist takeover that could result without active political participation.

Jones fretted openly about political and social apathy in the United States. Bob Levering of the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* wrote in 1977 that Jones "saw signs of apathy in the rise of Nazism in this country and the possible rise of fascism as the economy gets worse." He reported that Jones saw this indifference as one reason the CIA "got away with giving money to support the despotic regimes in Iran and Chile and why the American criminal justice system punishes poor defendants severely and lets off rich ones." Levering concludes, "Jim Jones has made his share of enemies for his political stands, but no one accuses him of being a hypocrite."⁴⁵

Bob Levering accurately described Jones as non-hypocritical, for the Reverend pushed his radical agenda in the arena of social justice, equality, and liberal politics not just with rhetoric but with action. Ray Steele, staff writer for the *Fresno Bee*, summed up Peoples Temple's involvement in California politics in an article titled "Peoples Temple: Service to Fellow Man," printed September 19, 1976. In the article, Steele writes that in the past year (1975-1976), Peoples Temple's donations helped keep a medical clinic in San Francisco open that otherwise would have been closed; benefitted research in the areas of cancer, heart disease, and sickle-cell anemia; supported educational broadcasting through KQED; provided cash to families in need, particularly those of slain law enforcement officers; increased the treasuries of groups fighting hunger, constructing schools, and building hospitals; and aided civil rights causes, both

⁴⁵ Bob Levering, "Peoples Temple: Where Activist Politics Meets Old-Fashioned Charity," *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, March 31, 1977, MS 4125, Box 1, Folder 3, California Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

financially and through demonstrations. Steele writes, “Jones admits he doesn’t adhere to fundamentalist teachings of the Bible, but is driven by his oft-repeated phrase of serving fellow man.”⁴⁶ Steele recognized Jim Jones and his Peoples Temple’s social action in San Francisco, but also the group’s move away from traditional Christianity, which exemplifies Jones’ push for a more radical agenda than before.

Jones, praised for his community work benefitting minorities and the poor in the late 1970s, won several prestigious awards. These awards included the Fourth Annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Humanitarian Award in 1977.⁴⁷ The Reverend was named Humanitarian of the Year by the *Los Angeles Herald*⁴⁸, prompting Jones to call 1976 the “Year of [His] Ascendancy.”⁴⁹ Most publicity about Peoples Temple and Jim Jones remained positive from 1972 to 1976, the years during which the group congregated in California. However, this seemingly unending praise shifted as journalists Lester Kinsolving, Phil Tracy, and Marshall Kilduff began to report negative stories expressing concern about Jones’ role in Peoples Temple, particularly as a healer.⁵⁰ These condemning articles most likely led to Jones’ retreat from San Francisco politics and spurred his move to Jonestown, Guyana.

Communism and Socialism in Peoples Temple

Jim Jones’ ideology regarding communal living did not begin in Jonestown. Prior to the move to Guyana, Jones and Peoples Temple experimented with collectivist ideas. Journalist Phil

⁴⁶ Ray Steele, “Peoples Temple: Service to Fellow Man,” *The Fresno Bee*, September 19, 1976, MS 4125, Box 1, Folder 2, California Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

⁴⁷ “Rev. King Awards Given at Glide,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 17, 1977, MS 4125, Box 1, Folder 3, California Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

⁴⁸ Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide*, 8.

⁴⁹ Fondakowski, *Stories from Jonestown*, 117.

⁵⁰ Fondakowski, *Stories from Jonestown*, 117.

Tracy recalls Jones saying that he was “feeding six hundred, seven hundred, eight hundred people a night in shifts! And they had access to things that as individual families these poor people never would have had access to... So I didn’t come into this thing thinking Jones was a freak because he was a collectivist... In fact, I thought he was on to something. The collectivist part worked. I thought that worked... But nonetheless, I came into it with great suspicion.”⁵¹ Tracy’s suspicions proved correct, as he also wrote of Jones’ misappropriation of California State funds given to Peoples Temple for foster care. Jones and the Temple would receive an “average of \$5 a night for supper, and Jones was feeding them for fifty-five cents, and the difference went into Peoples Temple’s coffers.”⁵² Jones’ statements show how some of his early collectivist ideas worked but that they were already corrupted by the mismanagement of state funds.

After Peoples Temple migrated to Guyana and established the Peoples Temple Agricultural Project, better known as Jonestown, Jones pushed his socialist agenda to the forefront. Jones required that his people, from the children to the elderly, be educated about the tenets of socialism. Jones read from Tass, the Soviet news agency, over the loudspeaker system nearly every day, with quizzes to follow. Some of the members of Peoples Temple changed their names to Ché (Guevara), Stalin, and Lenin, “though Jones cautioned them to give their birth names when questioned by reporters,”⁵³ so as not to reveal how radical the church had become politically. This evolution could have sparked public interest and investigation into Peoples Temple, which Jones feared.

⁵¹ Fondakowski, *Stories from Jonestown*, 108-109.

⁵² Fondakowski, *Stories from Jonestown*, 109.

⁵³ Moore, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, 54.

Jones continued his anti-capitalist and pro-communist rhetoric in Jonestown. Speaking to the Jonestown community on February 2, 1978 Jones declared,

We would like to look for critical reviews, at one insider's view of the Communist Party USA. In order for fascism to be avoided, there has to be a strong communist party, a strong socialist movement, and free, independent strong trade union [sic], none of which exist in USA, and that is why to avoid your utter destruction ... I brought you here to regroup, recoup, rehabilitate and gain strength, and militancy, and a proper education in Marxist-Leninism, which you had never picked up, even though I was avowedly, openly Marxist-Leninist and atheist, you have never picked it up, for the most part, in the United States, except for a handful.⁵⁴

Within the same address, Jones praised the Soviet Union and Cuba for their commitment to communism and pushed for revolution in the “puppet regime” of the United States. “It’s important that we keep our radical history and our radical perspective,” Jones implores. This speech shows Jones’ radical thoughts during Peoples Temple’s time in Guyana but also harkens back to an earlier time, as Jones speaks of “keep[ing]” the church’s radicalism.⁵⁵

Jones’ commitment to his communist and socialist dream would manifest further in Guyana. Demonstrating his dedication to his radical causes, Jones led his congregation with socialist-themed songs to create unity among his people:

Jones: Take your hand to your neighbor, please. The key of my song been, that all these years I’ve had no dying, and this is my theme. (Organ plays) (Sings) “There’ll be no dying,/ There shall be no dying,/ With socialism our leader,/ There shall be no dying.” (Speaks) Let’s make it so. Take your neighbor’s hand and lift it high. (Sings) “There shall be no dying,/ There shall be no dying,/ Oh, socialism is our leader,/ And there’ll be—”

Congregation: (singing) no dying.

⁵⁴ The Jonestown Institute, “Q235 Transcript,” accessed June 14, 2015, Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=27388.

⁵⁵ The Jonestown Institute, “Q235 Transcript.”

Jones: See, socialism is love. Love is God. God is socialism. Draw close and hug your neighbor close to you... Draw close... Get on board, little children. Get on board. Be good socialists, and we'll cause the kingdoms of this capitalist world to be no more, and become the kingdoms of God and socialism.⁵⁶

Jones and his people planned to move to the Soviet Union or another Communist nation. By the time the group reached Guyana, prominent Temple members began to meet with representatives from North Korea, Yugoslavia, Cuba, and the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union representatives were the most receptive to Jones, and “from youngest to oldest, everyone in Jonestown studied Russian in anticipation of a possible move there.”⁵⁷ In a journal entry dated February 3, 1978, Jonestown resident Edith Roller recorded, “Socialism classes met at 7:30 – all members of Jonestown are divided into groups for this discussion. *Introduction to Socialism* by Leo Huberman and Paul M. Sweezy is used as a text. Only the teachers have copies. The classes are so close together with little barrier between them that it is hard for the teachers to make themselves heard.” In her February 1978 journal entries, Roller recalls reading *Radicalism in America* during her time in Jonestown.⁵⁸ These instances indicate the growing radical nature of Peoples Temple. No longer was the Bible the main source of inspiration in the church; instead, books about socialism and radicalism became required reading for Peoples Temple members.

Reverend Jones hoped to create a socialist utopian commune that would rival the United States' capitalist society. “The Jonestown utopia ... became a new center, an *axis mundi*, in the geographical imagination of the Peoples Temple. Jonestown was the new ‘city upon a hill,’ a utopian model for a socialist community that Jones claimed had become the center of attention for the rest of the world,” Chidester explains in *Salvation and Suicide*. Jones, aware of the

⁵⁶ The Jonestown Institute, “Q932 Transcript.”

⁵⁷ Moore, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, 54-55.

⁵⁸ Edith Roller, “February 1978 Journals,” The Jonestown Institute, *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, accessed June 3, 2015, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=35693.

attention Jonestown received in the United States, emphasized the importance of his radical commune during his sermons. “It’s the only U.S. communist society alive,” Jones remarked at a rally in 1978. “We sure as hell don’t want to let that down.”⁵⁹

After the move to Jonestown, Jones warned his followers of the potential of danger back in the United States. “[The United States] has always had to have a war or a depression. I tell you, we’re in danger tonight, from a corporate dictatorship. We’re in danger from a great fascist state . . . and if [we] don’t build a utopian society, build an egalitarian society, we’re going to be in trouble.”⁶⁰ These types of statements alarmed loyal Peoples Temple members, who had access only to news Jones relayed to them.⁶¹

In 1974, Jones spoke of the condition of the United States: “Sure, it’s quiet. But the enemy notices all of that. Who is the enemy? The rich. The love of money is the root of all evil. Capitalism, the oppressive racism, that is your enemy, and they know your every move.”⁶² This condemnation of the United States demonstrates Jones’ very vocal and radical anti-capitalist beliefs years before the end of Jonestown in 1978, placing himself and Peoples Temple members in an “us versus them” state.

Jones began to proclaim not only his own socialist tendencies, but those of his people, condemning non-believers. “I’m so purely socialistic and some of my family is so purely socialistic, some of the members of this glorious Temple are so purely socialistic, that you’d be glad to work to see that everyone had the same kind of house, the same kind of cars . . . People are so afraid of socialism. They’re so terrified. They say, ‘What’ll it do to us?’ Why, you poor

⁵⁹ Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide*, 96-97.

⁶⁰ The Jonestown Institute, “Q162 Transcript,” *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, accessed May 18, 2015, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=27350.

⁶¹ *American Experience: Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple*, directed by Stanley Nelson, (WBGH Educational Foundation, 2007), DVD.

⁶² The Jonestown Institute, “Q1058-3 Transcript,” *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, accessed May 25, 2015, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=27330.

people.”⁶³ This musing shows that Jones believed his congregation had shifted from a purely religious group to one focused on pursuing the socialist dream and that those who were not socialists were to be pitied.

However, Jones’ socialist dream was never fully realized. Although Jones claimed equality among his people, later reports maintained that Jones and the church took money from Peoples Temple members. Guyanese soldiers allegedly found approximately one half-million dollars in cash and envelopes filled with Social Security checks signed over to the church. The author of an article in the November 21, 1978 edition of the *San Francisco Examiner* also states:

In addition, there was a report that another half-million dollars in gold was found at the camp. Ex-temple members put the church’s assets much higher, however, with some estimates ranging as high as \$10 million... While Jones and the church grew wealthy, the members of his congregation were virtually poverty-stricken, ex-cultists have reported. Casual visitors to temple services were asked to contribute what they could to the church’s humanitarian works, full-fledged members living outside the church were required to pledge 25 percent of their earnings to the temple and church commune members were pressured into giving all their income and often property to the church. Pleas for money never stopped.⁶⁴

Therefore, although Jones claimed to be living the “socialist dream,” wealth disparity did exist between Temple members and Jones. Nevertheless, Jones provided his followers with schools, hospitals, and other facilities to make Peoples Temple members’ time in Guyana habitable.

However, this utopian dream ended abruptly on November 18, 1978. After Jones called for the murder-suicides of Peoples Temple members that day, only one dissenter can be heard on the final audiotape. The dissenter was sixty-year-old Christine Miller, an African American

⁶³ The Jonestown Institute, “Q134 Transcript,” Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple, accessed May 18, 2015, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=27339.

⁶⁴ “Temple’s Riches Found at Death Site,” *San Francisco Examiner*, November 21, 1978, front page, MS 4125, Oversize Box 1, California Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

woman who had been a Peoples Temple member for many years. She asked Jones if it was “too late for Russia,” referring to an earlier plan to move to the Communist nation. Jones responded that Russia would no longer accept the group because after the deaths of Congressman Leo Ryan and his entourage at the hands of the Peoples Temple members earlier that day, the group would be stigmatized.⁶⁵ “I feel like as long as there’s life, there’s hope. That’s my faith,” Miller can be heard saying on the infamous “Death Tape,” recorded the last day of Jonestown’s existence. She claimed to be unafraid of death, yet said, “But I look at the babies and I think they deserve to live, you know? When we destroy ourselves, we’re defeated. We let them, the enemies, defeat us.” Her ideas were shouted down by Jones and members of the Temple.⁶⁶ Despite her protests, Christine Miller died in Jonestown with over nine hundred others on November 18, 1978.⁶⁷

Loyal to Jones until the end, Annie Moore, a member of Peoples Temple and a nurse in Jonestown, wrote in a diary entry that Jones was “the most honest, loving, caring concerned person whom I ever met and knew.” She continues,

What a beautiful place this was. The children loved the jungle, learned about animals and plants. There were no cars to run over them; no child-molesters to molest them; nobody to hurt them. They were the freest, most intelligent children I have ever known. Seniors had dignity. They had whatever they wanted—a plot of land for a garden. Seniors were treated with respect—something they never had in the United States. A rare few were sick, and when they were, they were given the best medical care.

At the bottom of the page, written in a different color, Annie Moore penned, “We died because you would not let us live in peace.” Her sister, Jonestown scholar Rebecca Moore, speculates

⁶⁵ Moore, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, 95.

⁶⁶ Moore, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, 96.

⁶⁷ Reiterman and Jacobs, *Raven*, 571.

that this journal entry was written November 18, 1978 during the suicides.⁶⁸ This sentiment shows the support Peoples Temple members still showed for Jones in their final days. Many followers still believed in the socialist utopian dream in Jonestown and would die for the cause. Rather than drinking the poison, Jones and Annie Moore would die from gunshot wounds to the head. According to the autopsy report, Annie Moore's shot was self-inflicted,⁶⁹ but it is unknown whether Jones' gunshot was self-imposed or administered by another Peoples Temple member. Mary McCormick Maaga argues that the gunshot to the head of Jim Jones "perhaps unmask[s] him as an outsider," for nearly all of his congregation died by poison, including his wife, Marceline.⁷⁰ This act of an "outsider" would be consistent with Jones' addresses and words to the same affect throughout Peoples Temples' existence.

According to historian Rebecca Moore, in a final move to show his commitment to the Communist Party, Jones left everything to the organization in his will, dated October 1977.⁷¹ A conflicting report printed in the *San Francisco Examiner* on February 8, 1979 states that Jones' will, dated August 6, 1977, left his estate to his wife, Marceline Jones, and five of his seven children. In the event of the entire Jones family's death, the Reverend's assets would be left to the Communist Party. Because his two daughters were left out of the will and three of his five sons survived the massacre at Jonestown, Jones' money and properties were not given to the CPUSA.⁷² Nevertheless, the inclusion of the Communist Party in Jones' will shows his commitment to the cause even after his death.

⁶⁸ Rebecca Moore, *A Sympathetic History of Jonestown: The Moore Family Involvement in Peoples Temple* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1985), 336-338.

⁶⁹ Mary McCormick Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown: Putting a Human Face on an American Tragedy* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 6, 136.

⁷⁰ Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown*, 139.

⁷¹ Moore, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, 20.

⁷² "Jones' Last Will: Estate to Wife, 5 of 7 Children," *San Francisco Examiner*, February 8, 1979, front page, MS 4125, Oversize Box 1, California Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

Political Aftermath

After the deaths of over nine hundred members of Peoples Temple, including Jones himself, politicians expressed conflicting viewpoints about their associations with the Reverend. In an opinion piece in an edition of the *San Francisco Examiner* dated November 22, 1978, four days after the murder-suicides in Guyana, an article was printed called “Jones and the Politicians.” The unnamed author of the article writes, “At least George Moscone [the mayor of San Francisco] is willing to admit he made a mistake in sizing up the charismatic leader of the Peoples Temple, and appointing Jim Jones to head the city Housing Authority.” However, continues the reporter, some would never go back on their associations with Jones because the Reverend did good works for the community. “A few of these politicians will fashion for themselves a platform of sanctimony high in the ozone of ultraliberalism and maintain that until the Judgment Day that Jones really was a lovely and ‘sensitive’ fellow when they knew him (and got his political support).”⁷³

In the same article, Assemblyman Willie Brown of San Francisco continued to show his support for Jim Jones. Brown said on November 22, 1978 that he had “‘no regrets’” about his “‘past associations’” with Jones. “The truth is,” writes the author of the opinion article, “that [Jones] had become liberal chic [in San Francisco] and was embraced by people who wanted his support and didn’t ask enough questions. We hope this will be a lesson to our leaders not to cater to whatever flaky group comes along, in an effort to capitalize off it politically. In the meantime, a little remorse is in order from some parties.”⁷⁴

⁷³ “Jones and the Politicians,” *San Francisco Examiner*, November 22, 1978, MS 4125, Oversize Box 1, California Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

⁷⁴ “Jones and the Politicians,” *San Francisco Examiner*.

Jesse Jackson maintained a positive view of Jones, arguing that Reverend Jones was a man who ““worked for the people”” and that he would defend Jones ““until all the facts [were] in.”” Jackson stated, “[Jones] felt great concern for the locked out, for the despaired, for the handicapped, for the minorities ... and that impressed me. As a result of that, he attracted a great following, and I would hope that all of the good he did will not be discounted because of this tremendous tragedy.””⁷⁵

These articles show that in the days following the death of Peoples Temple’s members, confusion and ambivalence surrounded the event. Politicians and prominent community members were unsure of how to react to the tragedy. While some stood by Jones, others condemned his actions at Jonestown. Nevertheless, Jones and Peoples Temple’s political impact in Indianapolis and San Francisco did not go unrecognized.

⁷⁵ “Jesse Jackson Stands by Jones,” *San Francisco Examiner*, November 21, 1978, p. 3, MS 4125, Oversize Box 1, California Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

Chapter 4: Racial Thinking and Women in Peoples Temple

Background

Peoples Temple, in many respects, resembled a black church. Estimates placed the African American population of the congregation at 70 percent in Jonestown, Guyana and as high as 90 percent in California,¹ although these numbers are difficult to confirm. In his essay “Jim Jones and Black Worship Traditions,” Milmon Harrison writes, “African American spirituality [has] a strong emphasis on social justice, the ultimate judgment of evil, and the rewarding of the oppressed,” and that believes God is on the side of the just.² These ideas, particularly those about social justice, interested Peoples Temple leader Reverend Jim Jones. Kinship, another integral element of black religion, could be found in Peoples Temple, as Jones stressed the importance of communalism and the needs of the group over the individual.³ These features of Peoples Temple appealed to a great number of African Americans in Indianapolis and later California and Jonestown who sought comfort and support within the church.

The Reverend Jones’ Pentecostal style of preaching also attracted African American parishioners in large numbers. Jones encouraged ecstatic dancing, singing, and playing musical instruments during services. These services relied heavily on “call and response,” a typical feature of African American religion that included the “seemingly spontaneous vocal interjections” of responses such as “amen,” “hallelujah,” and “preach” following Jones’ words.

¹ Milmon F. Harrison, “Jim Jones and Black Worship Traditions,” in *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America*, ed. Rebecca Moore, Anthony B. Pinn, and Mary R. Sawyer (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2004), 123.

² Harrison, “Jim Jones and Black Worship Traditions,” 128.

³ Harrison, “Jim Jones and Black Worship Traditions,” 128.

“Thus it [became] highly participatory,” Harrison writes, “requiring or encouraging all in attendance not to remain outside the experience but to join the collectively produced celebratory event, thereby sharing in the blessing to come.”⁴ Jones’ cadence, expository preaching, and emotionalism also contributed to the African American religious experience in Peoples Temple.⁵ Additionally, Jones administered faith healings, practiced glossolalia, and prophesized events, “provid[ing] space for the exercise of the charismatic gifts of the Spirit,” writes Harrison.⁶ Jones, able to skillfully blend religion with secular activism, provided a sense of familiarity and excitement for his African American followers, many of whom sought a space in which they were able to practice traditional black religion as well as participate in issues of social justice and equality.

However, this multiracial dream did not last. By 1977, many members of the congregation had followed Jones to his new establishment in South America: Jonestown. On November 18, 1978, the utopian commune “Peoples Temple Agricultural Project” in the jungles of Guyana collapsed. Over 900 people were commanded to commit suicide by drinking cyanide-laced grape Flavor-Aid—and most did. “We didn’t commit suicide,” Jones announces to his congregation in the last recorded Peoples Temple audiotape. “We committed an act of revolutionary suicide protesting the conditions of an inhumane world.”⁷ Even these final words spoken by Jim Jones related to the black experience in the United States by echoing the message of Black Panther Party leader Huey P. Newton.

⁴ Harrison, “Jim Jones and Black Worship Traditions,” 128-130.

⁵ Harrison, “Jim Jones and Black Worship Traditions,” 129.

⁶ Harrison, “Jim Jones and Black Worship Traditions,” 134.

⁷ David Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide: Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), 159.

This chapter will specifically address racial issues within Peoples Temple. The deaths of so many Americans puzzled the masses and raised countless questions. Although Jim Jones was white, the majority of his congregation was African American. How was Jones able to cultivate such a diverse following within Peoples Temple? How did race play into the religion and politics of Jones' congregation? Why did his people remain loyal to him even until the very end, when they were told to "die with dignity"?⁸ From where did Jones' ideas about race and civil rights emanate? What were these "inhumane" conditions of the world Jones was protesting by ordering his people to commit "revolutionary suicide"? These inquiries require explanation, and this chapter sets out to answer these questions.

This chapter also will briefly address Jim Jones and women's rights. Historian Mary McCormick Maaga, author of *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown: Putting a Human Face on an American Tragedy*, argues that the women of Peoples Temple could claim more power as secretaries and organizational leaders than as persons outside the group, yet I will maintain that Jones was not an outspoken advocate for women's rights in the public sphere. Furthermore, I will connect Jones' words about women to his condemnation of the Bible, arguing that he exploited the oppression of women in society to make his case against biblical teachings.

Black Religious Leaders in America

Before a discussion of Reverend Jim Jones and his Peoples Temple, an examination of prominent black religious figures is warranted, for Jones' ideas came from a long ancestry of radical political and social thought. This section will focus on Jones' contemporaries and

⁸ Julia Scheeres, *A Thousand Lives: The Untold Story of Hope, Deception, and Survival at Jonestown* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 230.

immediate predecessors, although many people and institutions influenced Jones' thoughts and actions. Father Divine, "Sweet" Daddy Grace, and Bishop Smallwood Williams, three such men who led these idealistic denominations in the early part of the twentieth century, perhaps served as influential forces on Jim Jones' Peoples Temple.

Father Divine's International Peace Mission Movement, which rose to prominence in the 1930s, shared similarities with Jim Jones' Peoples Temple. Like Jones, Father Divine (most likely born George Baker, although he denied this charge)⁹ envisioned a multiracial movement in which everyone could participate. Father Divine was African American, but a "sprinkling of whites" joined his church.¹⁰ He offered a better today for his congregation, unlike other pastors who promised their congregation a better future only in the afterlife. For some church-goers, this promise of a better afterlife was simply not enough to satisfy them.¹¹ Father Divine also "claimed to be God,"¹² and one who could cure disease and even bring people back from the dead, according to his people.¹³ These claims would also be made by Jim Jones some decades later to his Peoples Temple. Historian Jill Watts, author of *God, Harlem U.S.A.: The Father Divine Story*, writes that Father Divine's appeal "rested basically on the ... emotional impact of his sermons. He had complete control over his followers, forcing them to break family ties, practice celibacy, and surrender their savings to his ministry."¹⁴ In these ways—the multiculturalism of the congregation, the promise of a better here and now, and the church under the rule of one

⁹ Arthur Huff Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis: Negro Religious Cults of the Urban North*, (1944; repr., Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 53.

¹⁰ Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis*, 64.

¹¹ Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis*, 53.

¹² Jill Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.: The Father Divine Story* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), ix.

¹³ Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis*, 53.

¹⁴ Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.*, ix.

controlling charismatic leader claiming to be a deity—would very much be emulated by the Reverend Jim Jones two decades later in his Peoples Temple.

In the 1950s, Jones would attempt to take over Father Divine’s International Peace Mission Movement. He met with Father Divine and his wife, known as Mother Divine, to discuss similar tenets and ideas within their churches and the possibility of Jones taking over the Divines’ movement. After Jones failed to acquire Father Divine’s church, he “deluged Peace Mission members with letters and fliers encouraging them to abandon the Peace Mission and join his People’s [sic] Temple,” even sending a bus “equipped with loudspeakers blaring his messages” through Philadelphia, where many Peace Mission members resided.¹⁵ Jones’ attempts were unsuccessful and after Father Divine’s death in 1965, Mother Divine continued to operate the church under the Divine name.

The United House of Prayer, led by “Sweet” Daddy Grace (Bishop Charles Emmanuel Grace), who began preaching in 1925, also shares similarities to Jones’ Peoples Temple. Daddy Grace was said to be of African American and Portuguese heritage, tying him to minority groups in the United States. Like Jones, Daddy Grace claimed to have “chose[n] to lead the Negroes, lowly in state though they are, rather than the members of a more privileged racial group.”¹⁶ Jones also had a fondness for African Americans and took great interest in their struggles in American society. In Daddy Grace’s United House of Prayer, “God appears to be all but forgotten,” as “the beliefs boil down to a worship of Daddy Grace.”¹⁷ Similarly, Jones abandoned the idea of God and became the sole head of Peoples Temple, even openly mocking religion once the group reached Jonestown, Guyana in the late 1970s.

¹⁵ Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.*, 174.

¹⁶ Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis*, 23.

¹⁷ Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis*, 26.

A third church leader was Bishop Smallwood Williams, founder of the Bible Way Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ World Wide, Inc. in 1957. Williams, like Jim Jones, was an advocate for civil rights and used the church as a vehicle to achieve his goals. Clarence Taylor, author of *Black Religious Intellectuals: The Fight for Equality from Jim Crow to the 21st Century*, writes that Williams “promoted a brand of Afro-Christian liberalism that blended left-of-center politics and Pentecostal religious notions.”¹⁸ Bishop Williams “was unique among black Pentecostal preachers. Central to his brand of Pentecostalism was a strong political message advocating racial and social justice and the reworking of the political consciousness of Americans.”¹⁹ These statements could have described Jim Jones’ message in Peoples Temple, for Jones also began as a Pentecostal preacher striving to achieve social change in the United States, particularly for African Americans.

Reverend Jim Jones, the leader of the progressive, multiracial church Peoples Temple, belongs with this group of religious thinkers. Like Father Divine, “Sweet” Daddy Grace, and Bishop Smallwood Williams, Jones believed in the idea of forming a radical church that would defy its place and time in American society. These men concerned themselves with the affairs of African Americans and the underprivileged. They used their charisma to gain groups of loyal followers, some of whom believed their chosen leader was God or a god-like figure. This notion cemented the ties between the leaders and the followers, a relationship which could easily become unbalanced and dangerous. Most of these leaders used their power for good. However, unlike these religious leaders who came before him or who were his contemporaries, Jones used his influence to lead his people to destruction.

¹⁸ Clarence Taylor, *Black Religious Intellectuals: The Fight for Equality from Jim Crow to the 21st Century* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 48-49.

¹⁹ Taylor, *Black Religious Intellectuals*, 48.

Racial Tension and the Ku Klux Klan in Indiana

James Warren Jones was born in Lynn, Indiana on May 13, 1931. Several factors may have led to the creation of Peoples Temple and set it on its apocalyptic course, but the strong presence of the Ku Klux Klan in Indiana was particularly important in shaping Jim Jones' personal ideology. The racism and racial tension in Indiana also affected members of Peoples Temple, the church Jones founded in the mid-1950s in Indianapolis.

Before Jim Jones was born, the Ku Klux Klan had established itself as a major force in the Midwest. The highest concentration of Ku Klux Klan members resided in Indiana during the early decades of the twentieth century. Approximately 250,000 men and women joined the anti-immigrant, anti-minority, anti-Catholic, and anti-Jewish group²⁰ and it is estimated Klansmen comprised 23% of the white adult male population in the city of Evansville,²¹ where the Klan first established itself in the state in 1921. These large numbers of Klansmen profoundly affected life in Indiana, which surely influenced Jim Jones.

The Klan, known for perpetuating violent acts against its perceived enemies, targeted African Americans in the United States. Hiram Wesley Evans, the Klan's second Imperial Wizard, alleged in 1924, "The Negro is simply racially incapable of understanding, sharing, or contributing to Americanism."²² Klansmen did not see African-Americans as equals to whites; therefore, African Americans were a threat to whites. However, unlike the Southern chapters of the Ku Klux Klan, the Midwest Klansmen were less violent, described by historian Richard K.

²⁰ Richard K. Tucker, *The Dragon and the Cross: The Rise and Fall of the Ku Klux Klan in Middle America* (Camden, NH: Archon Books, 1991), 1.

²¹ Leonard J. Moore, *Citizen Klansmen: The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1921-1928* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 13.

²² Tucker, *The Dragon and the Cross*, 5.

Tucker as “flag-waving” nativists.²³ He writes that these Klansmen were a “mix of nineteenth-century Know-Nothing [nativists], fueled by a nationalistic fervor left over from World War I.”²⁴ Tucker claims that their “weapons were social and economic intimidation, boycotts, slanderous propaganda and rumor, awesome spectacles, vigilante patrols, and—above all—the ballot box.”²⁵

The ballot box was indeed where the Klan exerted its power. The Ku Klux Klan identified with the Republicans in Indiana and gained popular support in the 1924 election. “The order’s basic message was that average white Protestants were under attack,” historian Leonard J. Moore writes. “Their values and traditions were being undermined, their vision of America’s national purpose and social order appeared to be threatened, and their ability to shape the course of public affairs seemed to have diminished.”²⁶ To promote their ideology, the group released a weekly newspaper, *The Fiery Cross*. An article written in 1927 for the *New Republic* agreed that the Ku Klux Klan was a group not looking to make change, but rather to preserve the status quo, which they feared was disappearing in the rapidly changing nation.²⁷ These perceived revolutions included the participation of blacks, Catholics, and Jews in politics. The Klansmen feared that these groups would enact political and social change that would threaten the white American Protestant’s way of life.

The Indiana Klan obtained more power during the early 1920s. Although established in Evansville in 1921, the Klan expanded to Indianapolis in 1922 under the direction of Grand Dragon David Curtis (“D.C.”) Stephenson,²⁸ whose influence was such that at one point he

²³ Tucker, *The Dragon and the Cross*, 2-3.

²⁴ Tucker, *The Dragon and the Cross*, 5.

²⁵ Tucker, *The Dragon and the Cross*, 6.

²⁶ Leonard J. Moore, *Citizen Klansmen*, 23.

²⁷ “The Rise and Fall of the K.K.K.,” *New Republic* (November 30, 1927): 33-34, accessed July 19, 2015, <http://www.unz.org/Pub/NewRepublic-1927nov30-00033>.

²⁸ Leonard J. Moore, *Citizen Klansmen*, 16-17.

claimed, "I am the law in Indiana."²⁹ He even had presidential aspirations.³⁰ Stephenson was a powerful figurehead of the Ku Klux Klan in Indiana until he was found guilty of the abduction, rape, and murder of the white Madge Oberholtzer.³¹ The court's sentences ended Stephenson's political career and presidential hopes. His conviction discredited the Ku Klux Klan in Indianapolis.

Edward L. Jackson, another influential member of the Ku Klux Klan, rose to power in Indianapolis in the mid-1920s. Jackson, a former Indiana Secretary of State, served as governor from 1924 to 1929. His political career ended after he was investigated and tried on bribery charges. He was not found guilty, for the statute of limitations had run out on his alleged crimes.³² These charges show that prominent members of the Indiana Klan demonstrated corruption within the organization and became a major source of distrust for some citizens of Indiana. Among these skeptical citizens was a young Jim Jones.

Issues concerning the Ku Klux Klan also directly affected Jim Jones' home life. Conflicting reports about whether Jones' father belonged to the Ku Klux Klan exist in historical accounts. According to Harrison, Jones claimed that his father, "Big Jim," was a member of the Klan.³³ However, the writers for the Jonestown Institute argue against this charge: "Jones sometimes talked about the struggles he faced as a youth—and finally breaking away from his father—because of the latter's association with the Ku Klux Klan. 'My father was a Ku Klux Klan bandit, but I'm the greatest humanitarian, the greatest savior that this universe has ever known,' he said in 1973. None of these claims was true."³⁴ Furthermore, David Chidester writes,

²⁹ Tucker, *The Dragon and the Cross*, 39.

³⁰ Tucker, *The Dragon and the Cross*, 1.

³¹ Leonard J. Moore, *Citizen Klansmen*, 46.

³² Tucker, *The Dragon and the Cross*, 8.

³³ Harrison, "Jim Jones and Black Worship Traditions," 125.

³⁴ The Jonestown Institute, "What Was Jim Jones' Racial Heritage?", anon., accessed March 15, 2015, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=35365.

Jones' father "was recalled by Jim Jones as having been active in the Ku Klux Klan ... but, while his father may have been sympathetic with the aims of the Klan, no evidence of his membership exists."³⁵ Whether or not Jones' father was a member of the Klan did not seem to make much of a difference to his followers. More importantly, the Peoples Temple congregation believed Jones had overcome an oppressive upbringing by a Klansman and had somehow managed to construct a multiracial denomination.

Jones also told his followers a tale regarding a conflict with his father during Jones' young adulthood. Jones reminisced, "Feeling as an outcast, I'd early developed a sensitivity for the problems of blacks. I brought the only black young man in the town home and my dad said that he could not come in and I said, 'Then I shan't,' and I did not see my dad for many years."³⁶ This recollection again shows Jones' attempts to relate to and show empathy for the African Americans he recruited for his church.

Jones and Multiracialism

However, Jones actually lived his multiracial dream. He and his wife, Marceline Jones, adopted an African American child. They were the first white family in Indiana to do so. This act added credibility to Jones' message of racial harmony and integration. Jim Jones, Jr., a former Peoples Temple member and an adopted son of the Joneses, recalls, "I was the first Negro child adopted by a Caucasian family in the state of Indiana. Jim and Marceline actually went to adopt a Caucasian child. The story goes that I was crying real loud and it drew attention for Marceline to

³⁵ Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide*, 2.

³⁶ *American Experience: Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple*, directed by Stanley Nelson, (WBGH Educational Foundation, 2007), DVD.

come over, and once she picked me up, I stopped crying. My family was a template of a rainbow family. We had an African American, we had two American Asian and we had his natural son, homemade.”³⁷

Jones’ dream of a multiracial church was finally realized after he broke away from the non-integrationist Methodist Church and started his own church, which he called Peoples Temple. The creation of this congregation was a ground-breaking achievement, particularly in the conservative state of Indiana. “With few exceptions, blacks and whites did not share church pews,” write Tim Reiterman and John Jacobs in *Raven: The Untold Story of the Rev. Jim Jones and His People*. The authors describe the racial tension that persisted into the 1950s in Indiana, recalling the segregation of schools, neighborhoods, and the lack of equal opportunities for employment.³⁸ Several people interviewed for the PBS documentary “Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple” relay the importance of the integrated Peoples Temple:

June Cordell, Relative of Peoples Temple Member: It didn’t make no difference what color you were. It was everybody welcome there in that church and he made it very plain from the platform.

Eugene Cordell, Relative of Peoples Temple Member: We had some people that disagreed with Jimmy. They got up in the audience and they said they disagreed with him. They did not like this integration part of the services. We did ask people to leave the church one night because of that.

Rev. Garnett Day, Minister: Jim was breaking new ground in race relations at a time when the ground was still pretty hard against that. Jim Jones was hated and despised by some people, particularly in the white community.³⁹

³⁷ *American Experience: Jonestown*, dir. Stanley Nelson.

³⁸ Tim Reiterman and John Jacobs, *Raven: The Untold Story of the Rev. Jim Jones and His People* (New York: Penguin Group, 1982), 43.

³⁹ *American Experience: Jonestown*, dir. Stanley Nelson.

During the early years of his ministry, Jones seemed to truly “practice what he preached.” His achievements included creating a soup kitchen for the homeless, which fed hundreds of people every day. Additionally, Jones organized an employment assistance service in which church members helped the unemployed find work and gave them clothes to wear to job interviews. The author of an article appearing in the *Indianapolis Star* claimed, “The healing of America’s divide between blacks and whites was always at the core of Jones’ message, and Peoples Temple reflected that in the diversity of its congregation—a rarity then and even 30 years later.” In 1961, Jones was appointed to Indianapolis’ Human Rights Commission by the mayor, Charles Boswell. The commission had been created to address racial problems in Indianapolis. Boswell later claimed that Jones helped “pressure store owners and theater managers to be more welcoming” of African American customers.⁴⁰ Jones went on a thirteen day hunger strike in 1959, only “skim[ing] milk ... in his effort against discrimination in Indianapolis.” The Jones family claimed that the Reverend lost 25 pounds.⁴¹ Two years later, in an *Indianapolis Times* article titled “Race Relations Progress Cited,” Jones reported that “all but three of the 61 businesses here accused of racial discrimination have agreed to accept Negro customers.”⁴² Through these acts, Jones showed his desire for a more equal and just society, particularly for African Americans.

Not everyone supported Jones’ integrationist works. Because of their “rainbow family” and the progress Jones had made toward black rights in Indianapolis, the Joneses suffered harassment within the community. According to one report, a “middle-aged white woman” spat

⁴⁰ “Retro Indy: Jim Jones and the People’s Temple in Indianapolis,” *IndyStar*, accessed July 19, 2015, <http://www.indystar.com/story/news/history/retroindy/2013/11/18/peoples-temple/3634925/>.

⁴¹ “White Pastor Stages Hunger Strike to Protest Restaurants’ Prejudice,” *The Indianapolis Recorder*, January 24, 1959, MS 4125, Box 1, Folder 1, California Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

⁴² “Race Relations Progress Cited,” *Indianapolis Times*, September 8, 1961, MS 4125, Box 1, Folder 1, California Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

in Marceline Jones' face and then on their African-American infant son Jim Jones, Jr. The Reverend Jim Jones received a "slight concussion" after being struck in the head with a milk bottle by a white teenager upon entering the Jones family home. Newspaper reporters such as Pat Williams Steward of the *Indianapolis Recorder* recognized Jones' sincerity, writing in 1964, "Everyone in the civil rights field knows that Rev. Jones is 100 percent real in his beliefs and convictions."⁴³ Not everyone agreed with Jones' push for racial equality, but his efforts did not go unrecognized.

Jones began to relate to minorities and the oppressed on a more personal level. According to the Jonestown Institute authors,

Jim Jones identified with the African- and Native Americans in his congregations, and often described everyone in Peoples Temple—himself included—as part of the nation's oppressed populations of blacks, browns, Indians, and Asians. To make his point—figurative as it was—he often described himself and everyone who followed him as 'niggers' to distinguish themselves from those who have power and make the rules.⁴⁴

This statement shows how Jones was able to cultivate an "us versus them" mentality in Peoples Temple. Other times Jones claimed to be literally black, once saying in a sermon, "Some of you, you *think* you're white, honey, but you're just as black as I am."⁴⁵ Again, this shows Jones' attempts to empathize with African Americans in his congregation by showing them that he understood their struggles and was struggling alongside with them.

⁴³ Pat Williams Steward, "White Liberal Suffers Abuse from 'Both Sides,' Still Struggles On," *The Indianapolis Recorder*, July 25, 1964, MS 4125, Box 1, Folder 1, California Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

⁴⁴ The Jonestown Institute, "What Was Jim Jones' Racial Heritage?"

⁴⁵ The Jonestown Institute, "What Was Jim Jones' Racial Heritage?"

Peoples Temple and the Move to California

However, the pressures of a multiracial church in Indiana became too great for Jim Jones and his Peoples Temple. In 1965, the group decided to move from Indiana to California. Jonestown Institute managers Fielding McGehee and Rebecca Moore explain this decision in the PBS documentary “Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple”:

Fielding McGehee, Relative of Peoples Temple Members: There had been pressures on him to leave Indianapolis. He thought that Indianapolis was too racist of a place for him to be, and he wanted to take his people out.

Rebecca Moore, Relative of Peoples Temple Members: California is perceived to be a very progressive state. This would be the place to implement the dream of racial equality. Not Indianapolis, which seems hopeless, but California, which seems to be the Promised Land.⁴⁶

Peoples Temple spent the next decade in California, establishing churches in Ukiah, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. “If Indianapolis represented the conservative heartland, then California signified the progressive frontier,” Rebecca Moore writes in *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple*. “This ... suggested that Jim Jones was a political visionary who wanted the Temple to adopt a more radical stance than it had in Indianapolis, and perhaps even to become a player upon the world stage, like the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California.”⁴⁷ Peoples Temple members became involved in politics in California, volunteering their services to liberal candidates. In 1975, the election of the liberal mayoral candidate George Moscone was attributed in part to the efforts of Peoples Temple in San Francisco.⁴⁸ Many of the programs

⁴⁶ *American Experience: Jonestown*, dir. Stanley Nelson.

⁴⁷ Rebecca Moore, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2009), 23.

⁴⁸ Rebecca Moore, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, 29-30.

supported by Peoples Temple and San Franciscan liberals echoed the goals of the Black Panther Party and their “‘survival programs,’ which ‘contributed to the well-being of poor and working-class racial and ethnic minorities.’”⁴⁹ These actions show the growing influence Peoples Temple had in California, often benefitting minorities, during the mid-1960s to mid-1970s.

Members of Peoples Temple also began to use Black Panther Party rhetoric, as it was “an available and appealing syntax of revolutionary social and political change,” write Duchess Harris and Adam John Waterman in their essay “To Die for the Peoples Temple: Religion and Revolution after Black Power.” They continue, “As members of the Temple used this rhetoric, they expanded upon it, challenged it, and appropriated its meaning for use in creative, provocative, and problematic ways. Ultimately, these rhetorical strategies helped the members of the Temple to work in a world in which the radical, political, and economic orders were being rapidly reshaped.”⁵⁰ Jones “tapped some of the same sources of political and cultural identity that Huey Newton did, the same historical references to slavery as well as the more contemporary days of Jim Crow laws” in order to draw more people, both black and white, to Peoples Temple.⁵¹ Peoples Temple’s political actions and more radical rhetoric in California show a transition from private, insulated church to participation in a wider, public sphere.

Anthony B. Pinn argues that as Peoples Temple moved away from traditional theological Christianity and toward humanist and atheist teachings, African American participation in the movement increased. Pinn recalls that African Americans had joined the Communist Party in large numbers in the 1920s, and that a great number of African Americans were quite liberal

⁴⁹ Rebecca Moore, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, 30.

⁵⁰ Duchess Harris and Adam John Waterman, “To Die for the Peoples Temple: Religion and Revolution after Black Power,” in *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America*, ed. Rebecca Moore, Anthony B. Pinn, and Mary R. Sawyer (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2004), 105.

⁵¹ Harris and Waterman, “To Die for the Peoples Temple: Religion and Revolution after Black Power,” 110.

theologically and politically. Pinn gives the example of James Forman, a civil rights activist, “who rejected God and embraced human potential.”⁵² Pinn quotes Forman’s perspective on organized religion:

It is that leap of faith which I now refuse to make. I reject the existence of God. He is not all-powerful, all-knowing, and everywhere. He is not just or unjust because he does not exist. God is a myth; churches are just institutions designed to perpetuate the myth and thereby keep people in subjugation. When a people who are poor, suffering with disease and sickness, accept the fact that God has ordained for them to be this way—then they will never do anything about their human condition. In other words, the belief in a supreme being or God weakens the will of a people to change conditions themselves.⁵³

Forman’s quotation shows the connection between the push for civil rights and liberation from religion for some African Americans. By the 1970s, this shift in theological thinking became evident in Peoples Temple as humanism and even atheism became more accepted within the group. Jim Jones capitalized on these changing ideologies within the African American community, pushing for equal rights in a public, secular setting.

Jones’ increasing radicalism and connection to the civil rights movement in 1976 became apparent with People Temple’s publication of the newsletter *Peoples Forum*. While early issues contain articles on “subjects as diverse as killer bees, Muhammed Ali, freedom of the press, and Jim Jones hosting a TV show,” later editions are more radical, demonstrating Jones’ support for Huey Newton and providing information about the Black Panther Party. In late 1976 *Peoples Forum* covered a story about the FBI’s role in the death of Black Panther Party leader Fred

⁵² Anthony B. Pinn, “Peoples Temple as Black Religion: Re-imagining the Contours of Black Religious Studies,” in *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America*, ed. Rebecca Moore, Anthony B. Pinn, and Mary R. Sawyer (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2004), 15.

⁵³ James Forman, “God is Dead: A Question of Power,” reprinted in *By These Hands: A Documentary History of African American Humanism*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 272-273.

Hamilton. The cover photo from a 1977 edition shows Jim Jones and Huey Newton shaking hands. Additionally, the October 1977 issue includes an advertisement imploring readers to donate to the Huey Newton Defense Fund.⁵⁴ *Peoples Forum* exemplifies the increasing involvement Peoples Temple had in California with black rights leaders and racial issues.

Peoples Temple and the Move to Jonestown, Guyana

However, the amount of time Peoples Temple spent involved with California politics was short-lived. In the mid-1970s, Jim Jones and his people acquired land in the socialist republic South American country of Guyana.⁵⁵ This land became the site of the Peoples Temple Agricultural Project, better known as Jonestown. Many members of the church moved from the United States to South America, each with his or her own reasons. “They feared that the IRS might freeze the Temple’s assets,” Rebecca Moore writes. “They worried that the results of a child custody battle might remove one of the children from the community. They responded to Jones’ prophecy that a fascist takeover was imminent in the United States.” For these reasons and others, the most committed members of Peoples Temple moved away from their homes in the United States, “believ[ing] they were not just deserting something worse but also moving *to* something better. They set the goal of creating a community without racism, in which all children would be free and equal.”⁵⁶ Therefore, while there were many reasons for the migration,

⁵⁴ Rebecca Moore, “The Transformation of Peoples Temple in California: From Pentecostal Church to Political Movement,” The Jonestown Institute, *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, accessed May 25, 2015, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=61279.

⁵⁵ Rebecca Moore, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, 41.

⁵⁶ Rebecca Moore, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, 41-42.

the main goal was to establish a church free from the perceived oppression of the United States—one where everyone could live in harmony undisturbed.

Still, even thousands of miles away from the “oppressive” United States, Jones continued to speak about the Ku Klux Klan and its actions in the United States. The majority, if not all, of what he told Peoples Temple members was untrue. In Jonestown in 1977, one year before the murder-suicides, Jones relayed the following to his people:

Jones: What about the fact the Ku Klux Klan has increased one hundred times in its membership in New York, till just a few months ago, it almost took over Attica.

Voices in congregation: Right.

Jones: If you read your newspaper, your TV, it *almost* took over Attica prison. They almost *stormed* in and killed all the Indians and blacks and Mexicans. *Where?* Not in Mississippi, I’m talking about New York State.

Congregation: Right, right. (Cheers and applause)

Jones: Then it’s the *church’s* duty. It’s the *church’s* duty to have a place of protection for its people. We’ve got a place to protect our people. If we have nuclear war, we got a cave. [You] Say, how did you find it? The I- *spirit* of the living God showed it right down in the deep of the earth. We got one out in the west coast, you can’t find any end in it. Got water and *food* down there for nuclear war. But honey, there’s things worse than nuclear war.⁵⁷

The King Alfred Plan

In addition to the perceived threat posed by the Ku Klux Klan in America, Jones claimed that the United States government intended to remove all African Americans from society within six months. “They got plans... There’s a plan already laid aside to put you into gas chambers. It’s

⁵⁷ The Jonestown Institute, “Q987 Transcript,” Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple, accessed May 15, 2015, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=27635.

called the King Alfred Plan,” Jones claimed in 1972.⁵⁸ The following year, Jones pinpointed the United States government as the perpetrator of this plan: “We have this discussion of the King Alfred Plan here, we have the discussion . . . that the past cabinet just approved, which will be the total annihilation of the black race.”⁵⁹ In a sermon recorded in Philadelphia in 1977, Jones tells Peoples Temple members from where he got this information about the concentration camps:

I heard it from the heads of the government of the United States today, ‘cause I just come in from Washington, just flew in on the plane from the conference with the top notch leaders. I listen to them talk about planned takeovers . . . Task force warns nation to get ready for riots and to get ready for martial law and to get ready for concentration camps. . . Get ready for identification marks to be put on your body and identification marks, even if necessary tattooed.⁶⁰

Jones implored his followers to “go home and read . . . Executive Order 11490 and 11647. You go home and read it.” He continued, “Right now, they’re preparing to set up a dictatorship—it’s already written into law—that will give the president to move people wherever he wants to, to put them in concentration camps, to take over every office, over every factory. He’ll put serial numbers and a mark of the beast right on you. You’ll not be anymore a person, you’ll be a number. And every black and brown and poor white will be done away with.”⁶¹ These fears of concentration camps echoed the actions of Nazis only decades earlier and resonated with Peoples Temple members. “Racist genocide is not unknown and will be done again,” Jones told his followers.⁶² Jones, however, would be safe from this plan, as he claimed he

⁵⁸ The Jonestown Institute, “Q1059-2 Transcript,” Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple, accessed May 21, 2015, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=27332.

⁵⁹ The Jonestown Institute, “Q957 Transcript,” Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple, accessed May 21, 2015, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=60646.

⁶⁰ The Jonestown Institute, “Q987 Transcript.”

⁶¹ The Jonestown Institute, “Q962 Transcript,” Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple, accessed May 21, 2015, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=60680.

⁶² The Jonestown Institute, “Q197 Transcript,” Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple, accessed May 21, 2015, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=27368.

was too “light-complected” to be killed, explaining in one sermon that “if you kill a light-complected person, you’re in trouble,”⁶³ even though he had earlier made claims that “poor white[s]” would be taken to these camps as well.⁶⁴ Again, Jones’ increasing paranoia was evident, as he continued to try to convince his followers that living in the United States would be too dangerous for almost anyone in the congregation.

The King Alfred Plan scared many members of Peoples Temple. Jones became the savior of the group, telling his followers in a sermon given in August 1973, “[A] spiritual wickedness in high places is going to come to take [minorities] and put them in jails. Right now, they’re trying to get an executive order passed that will empower the president of this United States to put people in concentration camps without one consultation with Congress. Now it won’t happen to you, but you’ve got to cooperate with me. You want to be free? Then cooperate with me.”⁶⁵ Statements such as these show Jones’ desire to control Peoples Temple members’ emotions and to act as their protectors.

Laura Johnston Kohl, a former Peoples Temple member recalls, “We had no other radio or T.V. or communication with parents or any kind of ... update that could show us ... that there’s a whole other thing going on besides what Jim was interpreting for us.”⁶⁶ The members of Peoples Temple had little choice but to believe what their leader was telling them about the condition of the United States, particularly for African Americans. The idea of concentration camps forming in the United States did not seem that far-fetched, particularly because of the treatment of communists in the United States. The McCarran Act of 1950 allowed federal

⁶³ The Jonestown Institute, “Q1059-3 Transcript,” Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple, accessed May 21, 2015, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=27333.

⁶⁴ The Jonestown Institute, “Q962 Transcript.”

⁶⁵ The Jonestown Institute, “Q972 Transcript,” Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple, accessed May 21, 2015, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=60712.

⁶⁶ *American Experience: Jonestown*, dir. Stanley Nelson.

authorities to “round up subversives” and other undesirables, much like in Nazi Germany⁶⁷, so the idea that a program to put African Americans or other minorities in danger in the United States did not seem inconceivable to Peoples Temple members. However, the King Alfred Plan was not based in truth. It was an invention of John A. Williams in his novel *The Man Who Cried I Am*, published in 1967.⁶⁸ Without access to news coming from the United States to Jonestown, many Peoples Temple members believed Jones when he spoke of the King Alfred Plan and its implications for African Americans and “subversives.”

“Revolutionary Suicide” and the End of Peoples Temple

The end of Jonestown was also influenced by the African American struggle. Since Peoples Temple’s time spent in California, Jones had been using Black Panther Party rhetoric to sway his followers toward his radical beliefs. Jones alleged that “American society was so racist, so capitalistic, so fascistic, and so corrupt,” that there would be no returning to it without revolution.⁶⁹ On November 18, 1978, Jones ordered his followers to drink cyanide-laced Flavor-Aid. He referred to this act as one of “revolutionary suicide,” a term journalists Tim Reiterman and John Jacobs argue was borrowed from Black Panther Party leader Huey P. Newton.⁷⁰

Newton’s definition of “revolutionary suicide” is as follows:

We say that if we must die, then we will die the death of a *revolutionary suicide*. The revolutionary suicide that says that if I am put down, if I am driven out, I refuse to be

⁶⁷ The Jonestown Institute, “The King Alfred Plan & Concentration Camps,” anon., *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, accessed May 21, 2015, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=60990.

⁶⁸ The Jonestown Institute, “The King Alfred Plan & Concentration Camps.”

⁶⁹ Harris and Waterman, “To Die for the Peoples Temple: Religion and Revolution after Black Power,” 110.

⁷⁰ Reiterman and Jacobs, *Raven*, 374-375.

swept out with a broom. I would much rather be driven out with a stick, because with the broom, when I am driven out, it will humiliate me and I will lose my self-respect. But if I am driven out with the stick, then at least I can remain with the dignity of a man and die the death of a man, rather than die the death of a dog. Of course, our real desire is to live, but we will not be cowed, we will not be intimidated.⁷¹

Jones used similar ideas when he gave his speech to his congregation imploring them to drink from the vat of cyanide. He asked that his people “die with a degree of dignity.”⁷² However, Rebecca Moore writes that Jones “distorted the original meaning of revolutionary suicide by emphasizing death rather than revolution. Martyrdom, rather than revolution, was Jones’ goal.”⁷³ Huey Newton’s message was one of strength and perseverance: He knew that his actions as a revolutionary may lead to death, but he hoped others would carry on the message.⁷⁴ In his book *Revolutionary Suicide*, Newton explains, “Revolutionary suicide does not mean that I and my comrades have a death wish; it means just the opposite. We have such a strong desire to live with hope and human dignity that existence without them is impossible.”⁷⁵ Newton used Black Panther Party member Bobby Hutton, a man gunned down by the police, as an example of revolutionary suicide. Even though “his hands [were] lifted in surrender,” he was “killed while he was involved in a movement to overthrow the white racist establishment.”⁷⁶ Newton urged revolutionaries to “go down fighting” rather than committing suicide.⁷⁷ Therefore, Newton’s definition of revolutionary suicide took on a defensive posture rather than the pre-emptive definition Jones would endorse in the final years of Peoples Temple’s existence.

⁷¹ Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013), 355.

⁷² Scheeres, *A Thousand Lives*, 230.

⁷³ Rebecca Moore, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, 101.

⁷⁴ Harris and Waterman, “To Die for the Peoples Temple: Religion and Revolution after Black Power,” 112.

⁷⁵ Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide* (Reprint, New York: Penguin Group, 2008), 3.

⁷⁶ Scheeres, *A Thousand Lives*, 44-45.

⁷⁷ Scheeres, *A Thousand Lives*, 100.

Jim Jones took Newton's words about revolutionary suicide to mean one should literally commit suicide when signs of trouble or danger arise. For Jones, this "revolutionary" act of death was a final form of protest, in this case against racism, capitalism, and those who "bad-mouthed" Peoples Temple.⁷⁸ Jones spread his twisted understanding of Newton's revolutionary suicide to his followers, toying with the idea of mass suicide as a form of protest in Peoples Temple for many years. Beginning in the mid-1970s, Jones often pressed his congregation to agree to die for him and his fight against the oppressive United States. He held suicide drills to test the members' loyalty in preparation for emergency situations that he termed "white nights."⁷⁹ Edith Roller, who died in Jonestown, recalls one of these "white nights" in a journal entry dated February 16, 1978, nine months before the murder-suicides:

At length Jim [Jones] stated that the political situation showed no signs of clearing up and that we had no alternative but revolutionary suicide. He had already given instructions to make the necessary arrangements. All would be given a potion, juice combined with a potent poison. After taking it, we would die painlessly in about 45 minutes. Those who were leaders and brave would take it last. He would be the last to die and would make sure all were dead. Lines were formed as a container with the potion in it with cups was brought in by the medical staff. Jim said only a small amount was necessary. The seniors were allowed to be seated and be served first. At the beginning those who had reservations were allowed to express them, but those who did were required to be first. As far as I could see once the procession started, very, very few made any protest. A few questions were asked, such as an inquiry about those in the nursery. Jim said they had already been taken care of.⁸⁰

These "white nights" show Jones's plans for the total annihilation of Peoples Temple months before Peoples Temple imploded in November. The final "white night," which Jones also referred to as the "last-stand plan," echoing Lieutenant Colonel George Custer's last stand, a

⁷⁸ Scheeres, *A Thousand Lives*, 46.

⁷⁹ Scheeres, *A Thousand Lives*, 45-46, 92.

⁸⁰ Edith Roller, "February 1978 Journals," The Jonestown Institute, *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, accessed June 3, 2015, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=35693.

“final, suicidal attack” against Native Americans in 1876, would be one few Peoples Temple members would survive.⁸¹

On November 18, 1978, Peoples Temple members murdered visiting California State Representative Leo Ryan and members of his entourage as the politician attempted to leave Jonestown with Temple defectors. After this violent act at the Port Kaituma airstrip, suicide seemed for many members of Peoples Temple to be the only option. Return to the United States would be a hopeless endeavor, according to Jones, for the congregation would be persecuted, prosecuted, and possibly thrown into government-sponsored concentration camps as per the (fictional) King Alfred Plan. Therefore, “revolutionary suicide” appeared to be the answer to Peoples Temple’s problems.

However, Jones’ ideas about mass “revolutionary suicide” more closely resembled Newton’s definition of “reactionary suicide.” In his memoir, Newton contrasts the two forms of suicide by using the example of the poverty-stricken character Marmeladov in Dostoevsky’s novel *Crime and Punishment*. Using this character as a model, Newton claims reactionary suicide occurs when “the beggar is totally demeaned, his dignity lost. Finally, bereft of self-respect, immobilized by fear and despair, he sinks into self-murder. This is reactionary suicide.”⁸² Based on Huey Newton’s definitions of revolutionary and reactionary suicide, it can be argued that Jones and his followers actually committed the latter. Rather than dying at the hands of others with the hope that others would carry on the message afterwards, Temple members took their own lives at the insistence of Jones and his protest against the United States. Ultimately, 909 members of Peoples Temple would drink the poisoned Flavor-Aid – some by

⁸¹ Scheeres, *A Thousand Lives*, 99.

⁸² Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 4.

choice, some by force – and would die in Jonestown on November 18, 1978 believing they had committed revolutionary suicide for a cause with no solution.

Women of Peoples Temple

Jim Jones' radical beliefs were almost always all-inclusive. He questioned the Bible, espoused socialism and communism over capitalism, and fought for minorities and the underprivileged in society. There was one major exception to Jones' radical ideology: women's rights. During my research, I had expected to find that Jones was also an advocate for women's rights, but no strong evidence points in that direction. Jones' relationship with women was a complicated one, as women did possess some power as secretaries in Peoples Temple, but these leadership positions were not extended to all women members of the group. Some women pursued sexual relationships with Jones, perhaps giving them more power within the commune as well. However, Jones publicly humiliated women members of Peoples Temple during community meetings through beatings and other exploitations.

When Jones did speak about women, his speeches were attacks upon the Bible and biblical teachings rather than a campaign for women's rights. In a community meeting in 1974, Jones addressed the treatment of women outside of Peoples Temple:

And this very day, this very day, you women are—you're treated, not like a whole piece of shit—men are treated at least like a whole piece of shit—but women are treated like a little side shit. (Pause) The big shit show goes for the man. But the woman just accounts—You say, well, why are women treated so—why are women still not able to make the mon—as much wages? Women still to the s—the same jobs and make half the pay... We need women to be free, women just cannot even get free, they can work just as hard... Who [do] you blame for it? You blame your Bible. You can blame your Bible, you can blame your Skygod. Because a woman has never accounted for nothing but a

little side shit. She's never been anything. She's never amounted to anything. Woman's supposed to've been the fault of man's fall. Poor damn fool.⁸³

Jones continues this talk by recalling the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, mocking the story by referring to Lucifer as "Lucifart" and criticizing the text by saying, "God was a liar. The snake told the truth."⁸⁴ He connects the Fall of Man to the current position of the oppressed and proclaimed himself God:

That's what the Book says. And because Adam ate the apple that his good wife brought him, he must work from that day forward and earn his bread by the toil and sweat of his brow. He had to be a nigger from that day forward, because he ate a [sic] apple that his good wife brought to him. Now why have we listened to this shit?... I feel like tearin' this mess up... I bet you one thing, I may be just an ol' shit God, but I'm gone [sic] tell you. I'm the only God there is.⁸⁵

At first this address appears to be an endorsement of women's rights not only in Peoples Temple but in society as a whole. However, Jones' glimmer of radical ideology regarding women's rights in this speech quickly turns into an indictment of the Bible. Jones calls himself God and implores his congregation to follow him rather than the biblical "Skygod," showing his disdain for Christianity.

This call to follow Jones as God could be viewed as a new beginning for women in Peoples Temple. Some women had power within the group, but Jones used sex to draw many women into his fold. A few women, including Deborah Layton, became Jones' secretaries or board leaders. In letters to her parents, Carolyn Moore Layton writes that her tasks in Jonestown

⁸³ The Jonestown Institute, "Q1059-6 Transcript," Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple, accessed September 17, 2015, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=63620.

⁸⁴ The Jonestown Institute, "Q1059-6 Transcript."

⁸⁵ The Jonestown Institute, "Q1059-6 Transcript."

included educational training about socialism and organizational tasks.⁸⁶ As a member of the Planning Commission in Jonestown, Carolyn Moore Layton played an integral role in Peoples Temple.⁸⁷ However, Maaga writes, “It is difficult to determine how much of an influence Carolyn Moore Layton had on the specific decisions that were made by Jim Jones and the inner circle of Peoples Temple.”⁸⁸ These leadership positions for women in Peoples Temple did give them some power within the group even though Jones did not outwardly support women’s rights in his humanitarian and political works outside of Peoples Temple.

Other women gained power through personal relationships with Jim Jones. Carolyn Moore Layton began a sexual relationship with the Reverend, which resulted in the birth of a child, Jim-Jon (Kimo), in 1975. In an interview conducted on December 3, 1992, former Peoples Temple member Grace Stoen claims that Carolyn Moore Layton truly loved Jones and that for Layton, “power didn’t mean much. Love was what motivated her.”⁸⁹

Carolyn Moore Layton was not the only woman Jones pursued. Grace Stoen recalls that Jones complimented his women followers’ looks, making them feel “valued and beautiful.” Stoen also claims that Jones used sex to “draw people in and make them feel special,” Maaga writes. However, in the interview Stoen is unclear whether Jones purposefully used this tactic to “increas[e] [women’s] commitment to the movement and loyalty to him personally.”⁹⁰

These positions as secretaries or Jones’ sexual partners gave women some power within Peoples Temple but they certainly were not equals to Jones. No one, neither man nor woman, matched Jones’ power in Peoples Temple. Maaga argues that within Peoples Temple “there was

⁸⁶ Mary McCormick Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown: Putting a Human Face on an American Tragedy* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 58.

⁸⁷ “The Jonestown Memorial List”, anon., The Jonestown Institute, Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple, accessed September 26, 2015, <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/WhoDied/bio.php?Id=483>.

⁸⁸ Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown*, 58.

⁸⁹ Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown*, 66.

⁹⁰ Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown*, 56-57, 66.

an opportunity for some women to exercise power and authority beyond what either their gender or educational training would have allowed in mainstream society.”⁹¹ Nevertheless, outside of the group Jones did not advocate women’s rights as he supported equality for minorities, whom he worked hard to elevate in society. Furthermore, the women Jones surrounded himself with were “mostly white, privileged, young people in their twenties and thirties... All were women, all were white. Virtually all were college-educated,” indicating that not all women in Peoples Temple participated in leadership positions.⁹² Although some women may have exercised limited or superficial power within Peoples Temple as Jones’ secretaries and board leaders, women’s rights were not a priority for Jones. He did not actively promote women’s standing in society and instead used pro-women rhetoric about topics such as the need for equality of wages in order to condemn the Bible through the story of the Fall of Man, which he blamed for the lower position of women in society.

Furthermore, reports emerged that Jones abused his followers. In the documentary *Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple*, survivors and former members of the group recount witnessing public physical and emotional abuse at the hands of Jim Jones. Laura Johnston Kohl recalls, “We thought of ourselves as one big family that did handle our own discipline. I was in a lot of meetings where people were spanked or beaten, and I was slapped once, also in a public meeting.”⁹³ Former members also claim Jones stripped women naked in front of the congregation during community meetings and services:

Juanell Smart, Peoples Temple Member: [One woman] was to be totally naked and she was down to nothing but her skin—not even any shoes on, you know—no bra, no panties, no nothing.

⁹¹ Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown*, 55-56.

⁹² Reiterman and Jacobs, *Raven*, 157.

⁹³ *American Experience: Jonestown*, dir. Stanley Nelson.

Hue Fortson, Jr., Peoples Temple Member: Then they began to say what her breasts looked like, her stomach, butt, vagina, you name it. Everything they could think of, they were saying. By this time, her face is red, her body's almost red from embarrassment, and I noticed something. Jones was sitting, looking over his sunglasses, but he had a smile on his face like he's really enjoying this woman being torn down.⁹⁴

These public humiliations show that Jim Jones did not have respect for women. He degraded several women in community meetings, allowing them to be physically abused and stripped down and ridiculed.

Therefore, the women of Peoples Temple experienced contradictions in gender roles. A small number of white, educated, young women of Peoples Temple exercised some power in the group as secretaries and organizational leaders, albeit under the direction of Jones. The abuse women suffered should not go unrecognized, for these incidents were indicative of Jones' attitude toward women. They were to be used for his own pleasure and exploitation. Additionally, outside of the congregation Jones did not actively value or pursue women's rights, instead choosing to focus on the poor and minority groups with which he identified.

How Radical Was Jim Jones?

In the realm of religious, political, and racial thought, Jim Jones was a radical. However, this radicalism did not extend to all groups in society. Jones' radicalism did not apply to women, a large portion of the population in Jonestown. At least one study estimates that almost twice as many women as men lived in Jonestown, with black women making up 45% of the group and

⁹⁴ *American Experience: Jonestown*, dir. Stanley Nelson.

white women about 13%.⁹⁵ In comparison to other utopian socialist communes, Jones's treatment of women in Peoples Temple was an exceedingly negative one. I contend that although the leaders of Ceresco, Wisconsin restricted the rights of its women somewhat, they did not publicly shame them as Jones and his Peoples Temple members did. Additionally, I argue that the women of the Oneida Community and the Shakers had more power and autonomy within their groups than did the women in Peoples Temple and in Ceresco.

Socialist communes such as the nineteenth-century phalanx in Ceresco, Wisconsin grappled with gender issues. In Ceresco women performed the “slavish drudgery” of washing, cooking, keeping up fire, and marketing... Men would likewise never have to confront the six-day work week nor toil late into the evening,” writes John Savagian.⁹⁶ Women were promised a higher standing in these utopias than in the greater society, yet they “remain[ed] within their domestic sphere.” These women were in charge of maintaining family in their private sphere of influence, although they had limited power because “there was no home; it was replaced by cramped and shifting personal space, crowded dining halls, and limiting recognition of women’s work.”⁹⁷ Savagian also argues that women had little power politically in Ceresco: “Not surprisingly, women, although promised a better life under [Charles] Fourier’s system, were not members of the board of directors.”⁹⁸

The women of Peoples Temple had more power in leadership positions within the group than the women of Ceresco did. Peoples Temple members had more opportunities for upward mobility within the commune than the women of Ceresco did, for although the women of

⁹⁵ Rebecca Moore, “The Demographics of Jonestown,” The Jonestown Institute, *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, accessed October 26, 2015, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=35666.

⁹⁶ John Savagian, “Women at Ceresco,” *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* vol. 83, no. 4 (Summer 2000): 263, accessed September 18, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4636871>.

⁹⁷ Savagian, “Women at Ceresco,” 263, 279.

⁹⁸ Savagian, “Women at Ceresco,” 265.

Peoples Temple were mainly relegated to menial tasks in Jonestown, some became secretaries of Jones' and were given limited power through these positions. However, this power was usually reserved for a certain type of woman: white, relatively young, and college-educated. In Ceresco, women did not have these opportunities for leadership positions. Instead, they performed the customary tasks of women, such as housework.

The Oneida Community of New York, founded by John Humphrey Noyes in the 1840s, was a more progressive commune for women. Noyes did not support marriage in the traditional sense, calling for its "abolition or modification" in lectures given throughout New England. Within his commune, Noyes instituted "complex marriage," or the idea that "each woman in the group was the wife of every man and that every man was the husband of each woman." Those who chose to pair with one other person were "carefully separated, for permanent unions based upon the exclusive love of one man for one woman were regarded as unsocial and as dangerous to communal interests."⁹⁹ Did this sexual freedom and loosening of restraints on traditional marriage give the women of the Oneida Community more power? On the whole, women had greater autonomy, as most were not bound by marriage and were free to choose their partners.

The Oneida Community and Peoples Temple warrant comparison. Women in Peoples Temple did not have the system of "complex marriage," yet Jones had sexual relationships with several of his followers. Although accounts maintain that most of these relationships were consensual "expressions of loyalty and commitment between the people in leadership and Jones,"¹⁰⁰ relationships between members of Peoples Temple were not permitted in

⁹⁹ Alice Felt Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment: Phases of American Social History to 1860* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1944), 188-189.

¹⁰⁰ Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown*.

Jonestown.¹⁰¹ Therefore, overall the women of Oneida had greater sexual freedom than the women of Peoples Temple did.

Of these utopian communes, the women of the Shaker Society had the most autonomy. Ann Lee Stanley, also known as Mother Ann, left England for America in 1774 to establish the Millennial Church or the United Society of Believers, commonly called the Shaker Society. The Shakers believe there is a second, “feminine element of God.”¹⁰² They practice celibacy in order to become closer to “perfection and salvation.”¹⁰³ The leadership positions of the Shakers are delegated to an equal number of men and women, giving women power within the commune.¹⁰⁴

Of the four utopian communes I have presented, the Shakers are the most progressive society for women. They are also the only group of the four still in existence, perhaps because of the egalitarian nature of the organization. In Peoples Temple, Jones became God, the only deity to be worshipped, whereas Shakers believe God has a feminine side as well. Shakers strive to divide leadership positions fairly between men and women. Jones was the sole head of Peoples Temple, and although he had secretaries with some authority, he did not share the top leadership position. Celibacy within the Shaker Society is a curious factor. Unlike the women of the Oneida Community, “complex marriage,” which had given these women some freedom, was not practiced. Instead, Shakers remained celibate to heighten their purity.¹⁰⁵ This was not the case in Peoples Temple, as Jones was certainly not celibate. According to former Peoples Temple members, including Tim Carter and Hue Fortson, Jr., Jones did not restrict his sexual advances to women, propositioning men as well. Joyce Shaw-Houston, another former Peoples Temple

¹⁰¹ *American Experience: Jonestown*, dir. Stanley Nelson.

¹⁰² Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment*, 146.

¹⁰³ Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment*, 148.

¹⁰⁴ Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment*, 148-149.

¹⁰⁵ Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment*, 150.

member, claims that “Jim said that all of us were homosexuals, everyone except—he was the only heterosexual on the planet. And that the women were all lesbians and the guys were all gay. And so anyone that showed any interest in sex was just compensating.” Deborah Layton recalls, “What he explained each of us, and in sermons, was that sexual relationships were very selfish and took away from the focus of the church—and that was to help others. Jim was not celibate. Nobody knew that until perhaps it was their time to find out. What he spoke from the pulpit wasn’t what he did behind the scenes.”¹⁰⁶

So how radical was Jim Jones? I argue that Jones, despite neglecting women’s rights within and outside of Peoples Temple, was still a radical figure in the history of the United States. Although Jones fought for civil rights for African Americans and other minority groups within the system during his years in Indianapolis and California, he did not focus on women’s rights and was sometimes misogynistic. This harsh treatment of women does not diminish his radicalism on the whole, but is important to note. By the last few years of Peoples Temple’s existence, beginning in the mid-1970s, Jones no longer believed in reform from within the system for anyone, including for the minority groups he had worked tirelessly to help in 1950s through the beginning of the 1970s.

¹⁰⁶ *American Experience: Jonestown*, dir. Stanley Nelson.

Conclusion

Much has been written about Jim Jones and his Peoples Temple, but most of these works do not specifically address the radicalism Jones displayed through his religious beliefs, political ideology, and racial thinking. I have argued for Jones' consistent radicalism in Peoples Temple, unlike other scholars' and journalists' perspectives that conclude that Jones' radicalism became apparent only in his years in Jonestown in the mid-1970s until the collapse of the group on November 18, 1978. My unique perspective has been built from existing scholarship, transcripts of sermons made available only recently and that are still being transcribed, and primary source materials available through the California Historical Society in San Francisco.

In Chapter 1, I gave an overview of the life and death of Peoples Temple. I also explored the relationship between Jim Jones, Peoples Temple, and the historians who have written about them. I described my methodology, which has aided in adding new arguments to the existing scholarship. Lastly, I defined the terms "religion" and "cult," making the argument for calling Peoples Temple a religion, a group, or an organization rather than a cult. Many historians, including Catherine Wessinger and Marc Galanter, do refer to the group as a "cult." I concede that Peoples Temple did contain cult-like elements that should not go unnoticed, but have chosen to refer to the group as a religion.

In Chapter 2, I described Jones' radical religious beliefs. Although trained to be a Pentecostal preacher, Jones always had concerns about the Bible and its teachings. This perspective has not been emphasized in previous scholarly works. In the beginning of Peoples Temple's existence, Jones used the Bible in his sermons and spoke of Jesus Christ and God in the positive, with only intermittent mention of himself as a prophet or God-like figure. As he

began to perform faith healings in the 1950s and 1960s, Jones took on the role of savior of his people more and more, replacing Jesus and God from his sermons with self-proclamations of being the figurehead of the church. By the time the group reached Guyana, the Bible was figuratively and sometimes literally thrown out. Biblical passages were replaced with political ones as the group moved from a traditional religious group to a subversive counterculture movement endorsing socialism and rejecting capitalism. Jones made clear his distrust of and sometimes disdain for the Bible through sermons and addresses at community meetings. By imploring his followers to throw away their Bibles and to be skeptical about the teachings of the book, Jones exemplified his radical religious beliefs, which could no longer be called Christian in practice.

Chapter 3 was an exploration of Jones' radical political beliefs in Peoples Temple. I argued that Jones, although purporting to lead a religious Christian congregation, was more interested in political thought and action. Before Peoples Temple's existence, Jones called himself a Marxist and showed interest in the Communist Party. However, Jones' Marxist rhetoric, particularly in the later years of Peoples Temple's existence, perverted *The Communist Manifesto's* original intent. Jones prepared his "own brand" of Marxism, which he relayed to his followers. Jones purported to be operating a religious group rather than a radical counterculture movement, although the latter more accurately describes Peoples Temple in its later years.

Jones claimed to purposefully infuse Peoples Temple with his unorthodox beliefs. His ideology included support for communism, socialism, and Marxism in an environment that did not condone such philosophies. Jones did not hide his radical practices, attending Communist Party meetings as early as the 1940s and preaching subversive, anti-capitalist messages to his congregation. However, Jones continued to call Peoples Temple a church. This strategy proved

mostly effective in the 1950s during the McCarthy era in the United States as communists were persecuted and outcast from society.

In San Francisco, Jones became more involved politically. He worked to promote rights for the poor and for minorities, and relayed to his followers that they also needed to become political activists. Jones exercised his liberal radicalism in San Francisco, mobilizing his Peoples Temple to aid Democratic candidates during the early to mid-1970s. He served on committees to benefit the underclass of American society and was rewarded with appointments to community boards and meetings with high-profile Democrats. The time spent in San Francisco indicates Jones' move toward more public involvement in politics, with which he strongly believed the church had a responsibility to be involved.

After the move to Guyana and the establishment of Jonestown, Jones increased his anti-capitalist and pro-communist and pro-socialist rhetoric. No longer did Jones believe he and his Peoples Temple could enact political or social change within the United States. For Jones and his people, the migration to a newly created socialist commune in the secluded nation of Guyana became the only way to escape the perceived evils of the United States. The group's radical action of creating an "agricultural project" in Jonestown, Guyana rather than a Christian church was realized in the mid-1970s as Jones' followers migrated again, this time to "the Promised Land." Jones amplified his anti-capitalist rhetoric and transformed his once more traditional Pentecostal church into a socialist utopian commune. This commune would become the site of over nine hundred deaths as Jones convinced his followers they were protesting the inhumane capitalist system that existed in the United States.

The death of Peoples Temple caused much confusion as politicians, clergymen, news reporters, and others grappled with the meaning of the tragedy. Some condemned Jones while

others continued to recognize his positive work within the community, particularly in San Francisco. Jim Jones has remained a controversial political figure. While he strove to improve life for minorities and other oppressed groups, he also destroyed his utopian socialist dream in Guyana through the mass murder and suicides of Peoples Temple members. Still, Jones' radical beliefs and actions persisted until his last day, as indicated by his call for "revolutionary suicide," enacted November 18, 1978 in Jonestown.

Chapter 4 explored Jim Jones' attitude toward race and women within Peoples Temple and in the world outside the group. In many ways, Peoples Temple resembled a black church. Jones' preaching style and dream of multiracialism in his congregation attracted many African Americans in Indianapolis in the 1950s as he fostered a sense of community and equality for his members. The chapter compared Jones to other religious leaders, such as Father Divine, Sweet Daddy Grace, and Bishop Smallwood Williams, all of whom strove for equality for minorities and in some cases promoted integration within the church as well. I argued that Jones' interactions with the Ku Klux Klan in Indiana and within his personal life shaped his worldview and influenced his desire to racially integrate his congregation. This perspective has also gone unrecognized by historians, many of whom do not link Jones' experiences growing up in racist Indianapolis to his desire to help the underprivileged and minorities in the United States.

By the 1960s Peoples Temple had moved to California, where its members supported causes benefitting African Americans and other minority groups. However, the same could not be said concerning the role of women in Peoples Temple. Mary McCormick Maaga argued in *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown: Putting a Face on an American Tragedy* that women had more power in Peoples Temple than outside of it. I have maintained that power was restricted to a select few within Peoples Temple and that Jones was not an advocate for women's rights.

Although he spoke of the negative treatment of women in society, his main goal was to denigrate the Bible. According to Jones, the reason women were subjugated in society was due to the Fall of Man and other teachings of the Bible. Therefore, the oppression of women became tied to what Jones viewed as the negative side of the Bible and he used this connection to sway his followers against its teachings. The experience of women in Peoples Temple differed from the experiences of other women in communal settings such as Ceresco, the Oneida Community, and the Shaker Society. In these other groups, women had more autonomy and were not relegated to the punishments Peoples Temple members endured.

What was responsible for the collapse of Peoples Temple? Ultimately, neither black religious thinkers, the Ku Klux Klan, nor the Black Panther Party caused the fall of Peoples Temple. However, these groups did play a role in the shaping of the organization. Black religious leaders such as Father Divine, “Sweet” Daddy Grace, and Bishop Smallwood Williams had similar ideas about racial harmony or social justice that they enacted in their congregations. Furthermore, Jones was greatly influenced by the political power and presence of the Klan in Indiana during his childhood and early adulthood. Seeing the racism and racial divide in Indiana, as evidenced by the Klan’s political power and through personal instances of racism with his father, Jones created a multiracial church and family in response. The sympathy Jones had for African Americans and other minorities would persist throughout Peoples Temple’s existence through his sermons and actions. By convincing his congregation that the United States intended its minorities harm, he kept them loyal to Peoples Temple and convinced them that a return to the United States was impossible.

Why did the Peoples Temple Agricultural Project in Jonestown, Guyana ultimately fail? Was it due to Jim Jones’ megalomania, the murders of the visiting State Representative Leo

Ryan and his entourage at the hands of Peoples Temple members, or the radicalism of the “agricultural project” itself? I contend that the collapse of Jonestown and Jones’ Peoples Temple was due to all of these factors. Jones’ radical beliefs had always been present within the church, but intensified as the years passed and Jones vocalized his radicalism more openly. By positioning himself as the sole head of Peoples Temple, Jones’ words were to be believed and not questioned. This arrangement left the members of Peoples Temple in a fragile position as they were unable have agency or to leave the group. The murders of Leo Ryan and his entourage certainly sped up the process of initiating the mass murder-suicides at Jonestown, but Jones and his inner circle had been stockpiling cyanide for some time in Guyana. Jones held “suicide drills” called “white nights,” during which cups of said-to-be poisoned drink were passed out to test the loyalty of his people, in preparation for the final day in Jonestown. Although Ryan’s murder was most likely the catalyst for the mass murders and suicides of Peoples Temple members, the plan for the end times of the group was set in motion before November 18, 1978. I conclude that the inherent radicalism of Jones’ experiment was one factor that led to the deaths at Jonestown. Jones’ dream of creating a socialist utopia failed as so many communes before his did and many to follow would as well.

Reverend Jim Jones was a contradiction. He was considered by some to be God, whereas others called him an atheist. He was the Reverend of a Pentecostal Church, yet a leader of a political, subversive counterculture movement that many called a cult. He was a communist, a socialist, and a self-proclaimed Marxist. He believed he could enact change in society through good works for the poor and minority groups during the early years of Peoples Temple, yet did not support women’s rights. In California, Jones and his group became even more politically involved in the public sphere. In the mid-1970s, whether due to mental illness or because of the

complaints received by the Concerned Relatives group accusing Jones of mistreating his followers, or a combination of both, Jones decided that change was no longer possible from the inside. He moved his group from the United States to the secluded jungles of Jonestown, Guyana, where he became the self-proclaimed savior of Peoples Temple.

In May 2011 I attended a memorial service in Evergreen Cemetery of Oakland, California for those who lost their lives on November 18, 1978 in Guyana. A memorial displaying the names of the dead was unveiled at the ceremony. The decision whether or not to include Jim Jones' name on one of the four memorial granite slabs was highly debated among the former members of Peoples Temple. In the end, James Warren Jones was listed among the 918 people who died that day. The controversy surrounding the inclusion of Jones' name on the memorial is indicative of the way he has been remembered historically. Many people would like to erase Jim Jones from their collective memory, but Jones will be remembered for his impact on religious and social history in the United States through radical religious, political, and racial ideas that profoundly influenced Peoples Temple's life and death. Understanding Jim Jones and his radicalism is necessary for understanding Peoples Temple and why over 900 people died November 18, 1978. Through his claims to be God, his vision of a socialist utopian "Promised Land," and his dream of integration, Jones gathered nearly one thousand loyal followers who would eventually lay down their lives for him and his radical ideology by drinking the poisoned Flavor-Aid on November 18, 1978.

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