Second Paperback Edition
With a new introduction by the author

John R. Hall

Gone from the Promised Land

Jonestown in American Cultural History
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And all the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aron; and the whole congregation said unto them, Would God that we had died in the land of Egypt! or Would God we had died in this wilderness!

And wherefore hath the Lord brought us unto this land, to fall by the sword, that our wives and our children should be a prey? Were it not better for us to return unto Egypt?

And they spake unto all the company of the children of Israel, saying, The land, which we passed through to search it, is an exceeding good land.

If the Lord delight in us, then he will bring us into this land, and give it to us; a land which floweth with milk and honey.

—Numbers 14: 2-3, 7-8
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Introduction to the
Second Edition

To commemorate an irredeemable tragedy twenty-five years on is a difficult thing. Especially those closest to Peoples Temple—either as participants or opponents, or both—have struggled to come to terms with the murders and mass suicide at Jonestown. And gradually, people once estranged by what happened have reached out toward one another. But the tremendous loss can never be erased.

Most other people live with more distance from the murders and mass suicide at Jonestown, either because they only experienced the events at the time through the lenses of the mass media, because they were too young to understand—as if understanding had been a possibility, or because they were not yet born. For most people, then, Jonestown is doubly remote. Despite all the efforts to pin down what happened, how and why, it always has been an enigma. Now it is a faded enigma, even more hazy in the mists of time passed, pushed away on the sea of memory by the rising tides of more recent events.

Those who would understand the past have two basic choices. We can either try to make sense of the world as it was understood by the people caught up in the events at the time—and perhaps try to explain how events happened in part as a product of those people’s actions. Or, we can try to make sense of events from the perspective of our time, in relation to the larger course of history. Much has been learned by taking the first tack. We know that Jim Jones was a deeply flawed yet somehow visionary man whose movement attracted to Peoples Temple many decent and deeply committed people. And we know that the murders and mass suicide cannot be adequately explained by either madness in Jim Jones or evil that arose within him. In Gone from the Promised Land I elaborated an alternative thesis; later I subjected it to counterfactual analysis in Apocalypse Observed.1 Although the internal dynamics in Peoples Temple and Jim Jones are not to be discounted, the murders and mass suicide, I have argued, were the product of an ever escalating struggle between the leadership of Peoples Temple and their opponents, the
Concerned Relatives. Questions of detail about what happened remain unresolved, but absent dramatic revelations by participants—including agencies of the U.S. government—they are likely to remain unresolved. I, for one, would be surprised if new information radically alters explanations of what happened at Jonestown.

Yet as scholars now acknowledge, it is not only facts that weave the fabric of history. Facts are embedded in stories that make sense of them. Twenty-five years out, we now have a very different perspective on the wider history of the era of Peoples Temple. Moreover, we live in a very different world. Yet it is one that resonates obliquely with the apocalypse at Jonestown. What, then, can be learned by looking at Peoples Temple in its times, as we now see those times? And what can be learned about our times by reflecting on Jonestown?

The entire history of Peoples Temple as a social movement—from the 1950s to the 1980s—took place during the period of the Cold War. Communism seemed a serious threat both to the capitalist establishment in the West and to political defenders of American freedom. A new “postindustrial” society—driven by production of knowledge—was emerging, and the middling classes were beginning to follow the well-to-do in putting leisure and consumption rather than work and production at the center of their lives. Socioeconomic class remained the central organizing axis of society, and non-whites were concentrated in the lower classes.

Jim Jones was a child of the “old Left” who crossed the divide of World War II and the onset of the Cold War. In the 1950s he established Peoples Temple as a religious organization in Indiana in part by challenging racial segregation, and in its move to California in the 1960s, the Temple participated in the tides of social change of the decade—the civil-rights movement, the anti-Vietnam war movement, and the New Left. I may have missed a distinctly feminist discourse within Peoples Temple, if it was there, but certainly the group seems to have cultivated the talents and abilities of its members, whoever they were. The 1960s were also the era of the counterculture, and although Peoples Temple was not strictly speaking a Flower-Power kind of organization, if memory serves, it was listed in a directory of communal organizations, and certainly it attracted people conversant in the milieu of the counterculture. During the 1970s Peoples Temple indeed became an increasingly communal organization. In fact, it was one of the larger ones, akin to The Farm in Tennessee and the later Rajneeshpuram colony in Oregon. In short, as Peoples Temple grew and developed, the group channeled a dis-
tinctive confluence of its historical moment—of Left politics aligned with interracial communalism, wrapped within an organization that was unusual in its capacity to infuse countercultural discourse with a radicalized religiosity.

In the 1970s the American political pendulum began its swing in the opposite direction. Peoples Temple’s wrenching and apocalyptic end marks that shift in ways that we can only begin to understand with the passage of time. The radical Left and counterculture’s emergence in the 1960s did not go unchallenged. Rather, there was a broad-based reaction—on cultural, social, and political fronts. Socially, many counterculturalists found themselves in the position that sociologist Max Weber once described for charismatic movements more generally: the attractions and demands of everyday life began to take precedence over the calls for extraordinary sacrifice to meet extraordinary challenges. Politically, the end of the Vietnam War underminded the mass basis of the New Left movement, the class- and race-based coalition of the Democratic Party collapsed, and New Left politics morphed into a panoply of distinctive, single-issue “new social movements”—feminist, gay-rights, environmental, and others.

The political Right, stung by Richard Nixon’s resignation, began to regroup under the banner of supply-side economics and what eventually came to be called neo-conservatism. Culturally, the radicalism of the counterculture softened as its ideas and practices became marketed by corporations and otherwise diffused through mainstream society. On the other side of the cultural divide, the free-wheeling ’60s met with reaction by conservative Christians and, to a lesser extent, mainstream family-oriented Americans. This development energized the so-called anti-cult movement, in which the opponents of Peoples Temple—the Concerned Relatives—found not only common cause but specific strategies of opposition. It is here, where the tides of history ran in both directions at once, that the Jonestown murders and mass suicide can be located. To explain the tragedy on the basis of its wider context in any reductive way would be a mistake, yet conversely, the apocalypse at Jonestown stands as something of a marker of an epochal shift.

No event in history, no matter how dramatic, divides one period completely from another. Though the Soviet Union already was crumbling from within, no one knew in 1978 what would become obvious in 1989. By the 1990s Francis Fukuyama could announce “the end of history” in the triumph of democratic polities and capitalist economy in the face of all utopian alternatives. Yet Fukuyama’s pronouncement depended on a modernist Enlightenment vision that
dissociates utopia, built upon the refinement of secular institutions, from religion. Jonestown marks a different “end of history”—and equally, some beginnings. It came as a dénouement for the counterculture and the New Left, as class-based, mass organized democratic politics waned at the end of modernity in its high phase, when postindustrial and postmodern society, however much anticipated, still had not become definitively established. After Jonestown, the neo-conservative revolution.

Fukayama’s pronouncement, we now know, did not end history. This is so in two senses. First, any proclaimed lack of a utopian alternative to the democratic state and globalizing corporate capitalism seems like a distinctly Western view of history, based in a secularizing modernity, and thus oblivious to either the recent tides of religious fundamentalism, or to any utopia—like the Islamic one of Sayyid Qutb, for example—that seeks a new synthesis of the religious with elements of modernity. At the end of history, a fusion of religious meaning with violence begets a new history.

Second, Fukayama’s utopian vision of modernity based in free markets and democratic choice seems distant from modern institutions on the ground. Already in the 1990s a synergetic combination of media concentration, marketing research, and corporate financing of politics was undermining democracy as practiced in the United States and other democratic states. And the collapse of communism has hardly encouraged any global flowering of democratic institutions. Instead, especially with the American election of 2000 and terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, ideals of democracy and liberty have been sacrificed to the politics and power of empire and security.

What the new era brings is a question of future history that we are all still writing. Given that the apocalypse at Jonestown occurred twenty-five years in the past, if we are to make it meaningful, we will make it meaningful in our times. What can we learn from Jonestown now?

Peoples Temple was wrought of earlier times, but it is a harbinger of ours. Before Jonestown, a thesis of secularization held that even seemingly religious conflict—in Northern Ireland or the Middle East—was either a remnant of pre-modern “primordial” attachments or a product of more material processes merely shrouded in religious symbols. After Jonestown, religion could no longer be treated as a “closed book” of prophecy, and although social scientists have been slow to acknowledge the point, we have been increasingly forced to recognize that religion unleashes forces that now hold the prospects of modernity in the balance.
For people who know little about Peoples Temple and the genesis of the murders and mass suicides, it would be easy to lay the blame for the carnage at the feet of Jim Jones. Yet as memories of Jonestown fade, such ritual cleansing loses its power. More importantly, it represses a deeper lesson that has become all the more urgent in the wake of 9/11: countercultural religious conflict is a dialectical process in which each side is labeled by the other as “evil.” It escalates—or becomes defused—on the basis of moves taken on two sides of the apocalyptic divide. To vanquish evil can become a crusade that begets evil.2

In the aftermath of Jonestown, many observers pointed to atrocities they alleged Jim Jones to have committed, and to the totalitarian organization that they deemed Peoples Temple to have become. When I began investigating these issues for Gone from the Promised Land, initially I thought that many criticisms of Peoples Temple amounted to cultural rejections of communalism. On this basis, Jonestown became a symbol that could be used to demean the wider communal movement of its day. But as I continued my research, I found something else going on as well. When I examined the organizational form, the practices of social control, the politics, and the public relations efforts of Peoples Temple, I could not help but be struck by the many ways in which the group borrowed from wider cultural practices. Its most unseemly manipulations and control, I found, were but distorted exaggerations of practices much more widespread in modern society. This finding led me to see the scapegoating of Jim Jones in a different light. Yes, society was being ritually cleansed of things deeply repugnant, but those things were not simply external threats, they were intimately connected but necessarily repressed aspects of modernity.

Yet ritual cleansing changes the world only symbolically, not substantively. And so, at the conclusion of Gone from the Promised Land I suggested that people concerned about the evil in Jim Jones should look beyond Peoples Temple, to see if confronting that evil helped produce moral clarity about the wider world.

Using a moral critique of Peoples Temple’s more troubling practices as a basis for wider critique seems all the more urgent now. The sign in the pavilion at Jonestown, quoting George Santayana, read, “Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Let us recall too that one of the opponents of the Branch Davidians before the conflagration at Mount Carmel worried about “another Jonestown.” We will all make our own meanings in these matters, but we do need to take stock of a world where democracy seems
increasingly subordinated to an amalgamation of advertising and empire, human and civil rights sacrificed to security, peace and justice to preemptive power. Unfortunately, the tyrannies of Jonestown are still with us.

There is another side to Peoples Temple, often overlooked in the rush to misunderstand its tragic end. A utopian organization, it attracted people of good will from all walks of life, who consolidated a critical understanding of modern society, and put prodigious energies toward building what they hoped would be a better world. The people of Peoples Temple failed to realize that world in this world. But after twenty-five years, we should acknowledge their dedication and their humanity, and find its sources in ourselves. Because Jonestown is a harbinger of a world after modernity, we must each find our calling in the face of a history that has not ended.

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Notes


Preface

We live with Jonestown in the past. Over the years a parade of books has told the story of the murders and mass suicide that took place there. What more could possibly be learned? The present book will answer that for the people who read it. But I want to say at the outset why I wrote about Peoples Temple, knowing that the shelf already was long, and getting longer.

Jacob Burckhardt admitted in *The Civilization of the Renaissance* that he had written one more book on an already widely studied topic. He knew that previous authors might disagree with what he had to say, but this was the very reason for his effort: “Such indeed is the importance of the subject that it still calls for fresh investigation, and may be studied with advantage from the most varied points of view.” So it is with Peoples Temple.

When I first published an article on Jonestown in 1979, a friend asked whether I planned a book on the subject. I did not think so. But it became increasingly clear that justifiable public shock at mass carnage prevented the parade of books from offering anything much deeper than a “devil” or “psycho” story. I realized that the passage of time would increase the problem. It seemed important to set down a reasoned study before the memories of individuals involved became too hazy, before popular histories rendered the primary sources silent.

The further I went with research for this book, the more I became convinced that important aspects of Jonestown’s history have been overlooked, poorly understood, or even wildly distorted. Because any new history that tries to remedy these problems may meet controversy, it seems to me that the public is entitled to an account that offers future researchers a thorough guide to the evidence. I therefore have included notes with extensive documentation. So that reference numbers for notes will not overly clutter the text, each note cites all sources relevant to a given topic. The text is self-contained, and most readers will have little occasion to flip back to the notes.

For myself, I have learned much by this writing, and I am grateful for the help, opportunities, and support that made it possible. Of greatest importance was the willingness of individuals to be interviewed about events that were so tragic to them personally. I appreciate the help of those
with whom I talked (whose names appear in the footnotes unless they requested anonymity), and I hope that whether or not they always agree with what I have written, they will understand that I share their sorrow.

Perhaps because the present book deals with a stigmatic event of overwhelming proportions, research for it did not readily attract funding by private foundations or the state. Two sources of financial support thus were all the more critical: a Summer Research Fellowship from the Graduate Research Council and a sabbatical leave from the Department of Sociology, both at the University of Missouri-Columbia. These institutional commitments offer some testament to the possibilities of academic freedom. The cooperation of other organizations also was essential to the present study. The government of Guyana offered me valuable assistance when I visited there. Both the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation and Department of State provided me with substantial materials (though they have not yet released all relevant documents that should become public). The relevance of materials that could be obtained only from the U.S. government underscores the importance of the Freedom of Information Act.

In San Francisco, California, the attorney for Peoples Temple during its last years, Charles Garry, allowed me access to Temple files, and he and his investigative assistant Pat Richartz offered valuable background on the documents. Across town, the California Historical Society made available materials still not completely catalogued, and Sandra McCoy Larson brought to my attention documents that I might never have found otherwise.

Finally, my efforts have been eased by support and encouragement from colleagues, secretaries, friends, and relations: Nancy Allen, Michael Barkun, Howard S. Becker, Patty Berns, Lynn Brown, Teri Cone, David De Leon, Michelle Duckett, Michael Flynn, Jane Grieco, Marian Ross Hall, Ted Hall, Gary Hamilton, Michael Hechter, Julie Helming, Irving Louis Horowitz, Ed Kick, Paula McKey, Rebecca Moore, Amanda Noble, Mary Jo Neitz, George Primov, Richard Riddle, Tom Robbins, Guenther Roth, Peter Salter, Francis Shor, Katarina Toll, Gail Ullman, Andy Walker, Brenda Warren, and Sharon Watson. Some of these good people have helped in ways that they might consider incidental. They should know that seemingly casual remarks can have profound effects! Others tried to teach me something, or read and commented on typed drafts of the manuscript, or listened to my ruminations. I thank them all and I am deeply moved by the spirit that animates their lives. The book is stronger for their help. The shortcomings that remain are mine alone. Yet even if scholarship is never without faults, my moral commitment is to truth and light.
Introduction:
The Cultural Puzzle of Jonestown

What are we to make of the murders of a congressman and four others and the subsequent mass suicide of over 900 people at Jonestown, Guyana? In the years after November 18, 1978, popular accounts effectively used the events to establish Jim Jones as a scapegoat personifying the alien threat of so-called cults. But that prevailing interpretation has kept us from understanding Peoples Temple as another sort of scapegoat, bearing hidden cultural burdens of U.S. society. If we are to learn anything of value from the tragedy at Jonestown, its history must be salvaged from myth before it passes from our collective memory. In this book I try to reason about what happened, why, and how it was tied to our ideals, our practices, and the tensions of modern culture.

The basic facts are well established. On Monday, November 13, 1978, California congressman Leo Ryan flew from Washington, D.C., to the socialist country of Guyana, on the northeast coast of South America, to visit the large, predominantly Black communal settlement called Jonestown. With Ryan and a press entourage were members of a group called the Concerned Relatives, who charged that the remote jungle community run by Peoples Temple was holding individuals against their will. On Saturday, November 18, gunmen from Jonestown ambushed the group as they were boarding planes at a nearby airstrip after leaving Jonestown. Shot to death were Ryan, three news reporters, and a young woman in a group of fifteen people who had decided to depart from Jonestown with the visitors.

By Tuesday, November 21, the world learned that the Indiana-born Reverend Jim Jones, Peoples Temple's charismatic White leader, had led over 400 residents of Jonestown to drink a poison punch in a cataclysm of murder and mass suicide staged shortly after Ryan and the others had been killed. An initial news story was self-contradictory: "Those who tried to refuse the poison or escape were forced by armed guards to take it," yet somehow there remained hope for several hundred Jonestown residents who "apparently" had fled into the jungle rather than drink the purple Flavor-Aid laced with cyanide and other drugs.1
In the following days journalists speculated that survivors had sought refuge in nearby Amerindian villages or fled to Venezuela, about fifteen miles away. Members of the Concerned Relatives meanwhile declared in the press that even from its collective grave Peoples Temple would try to get revenge against its opponents. They feared that Jones's followers in Georgetown, the capital of Guyana, and at the U.S. headquarters of Peoples Temple in San Francisco would organize "hit squads" to assassinate Temple enemies and high-ranking public officials. Not until a week after the event did the truth emerge: initial body counts had been grossly inaccurate. A collective suicide and murder had taken the lives of practically an entire community, leaving only a handful of demoralized survivors. The death toll was over 900.

The question of how many people at Jonestown willingly took the poison always will be open to debate. Certainly young children could not have evaluated very well what their actions would mean. The presence of armed guards shows at least implicit coercion, though the guards themselves reported their intentions to visitors in glorious terms and then took the poison. Nor was the situation structured as one of individual choice. Jim Jones proposed a collective action, and in the discussion that followed only one woman offered extended opposition. No one rushed up to tip over the vat of Fla-Vor-Aid. Wittingly, unknowingly, or reluctantly, they took the poison.

In the United States the news slowly filtering back was a time bomb of horror compounding horror. Amidst a flood of press reports and three "instant books" published by mid-December, the New Republic argued that the mass suicide and murder triggered a collective experience of loss and devastation greater than anything concerning the United States since the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963. Large numbers of Americans became emotionally immersed in the tragedy. Even if people did not know exactly what had happened, they knew that, like the Kennedy assassination, it could never be understood.

We are all world spectators to some degree, and we develop a sense of what is plausible both in the drama of everyday life and on an historical scale. But sometimes the curtains that mark the boundaries of the plausible world are drawn back, and beyond them we see things too awesome to contemplate, too unsettling to accept as part of the world's drama. So it is with suicide. We recognize what our popular culture shows, that sometimes people may take their own lives for altruistic reasons, as did Japanese kamikaze pilots during World War II. And we may be dimly aware that some suicides are fulfillments of social codes of honor. But we do not understand the concept of honor in modern Western societies; it seems old fashioned.
Our culture incorporates civic and religious taboos against suicide. Discounting honor and altruism, we regard the act as an affront to a community and society at large, a deliberate and final cutting short of any social intercourse. In religious terms, it often is treated as a sin. In the modern vocabulary of psychiatry, almost by definition, suicide is regarded as a sign of devastating mental disorder. Whether the sources are religious or therapeutic, the conclusion is the same: suicide lies beyond the pale. Thus, in the face of the unthinkable, culture salvages plausible reality by covering the abyss with a curtain circumscribing a world that we can affirm.

From beyond the curtain bordering reality came the photographic images of Jonestown, pictures of all those bodies lying in waste. Why were they there? What could collective death in a single dramatic act like this mean? Was the collective act a response to circumstances in the world the people at Jonestown left behind? This, in fact, is how their leader portrayed the matter. At the meeting held in Jonestown after Ryan's group departed, Jim Jones called the collective poisoning "revolutionary suicide protesting the conditions of an inhumane world."6

The viewpoint from the established culture would have to be quite different. The people of Jonestown could not have had a compelling reason for what they did, for the integrity of our own social existence would thereby be placed in doubt. Giving credence to Jones’s account would require concluding the unthinkable: that the people of Jonestown were "justified" in taking the action of terminating the lives of an entire community.

Whatever meaning Americans sought for the tragedy could be established only under a contrasting assumption that pointed public discourse in less threatening directions. Because there could be no "reason" for the tragedy, the question of blame became the central issue. Even on this terrain some explanations might be discomfiting in their revelations and conclusions, but at least they would reaffirm the plausibility of a world in which the unnecessary and meaningless deaths of some 918 people might have been prevented.

In the foreign press Jonestown often became a symptom of U.S. malaise. The Soviet news agency Tass took a line not so different from Jones’s: the mass suicide somehow reflected life in the United States, where "millions are the victims of an inhumane society." A Tokyo editor saw Blacks and other disenfranchised Americans disappointed by the contradiction between the myth of affluence and their own material circumstances. Others described Jonestown as the natural outgrowth of a permissive society where culturally adrift people confused by the choices of "near total freedom" sometimes opt for the security of commitment to charismatic leaders who
offer religious purpose, emotional excitement, and sexual license. This line of interpretation reached its full flower in an engaging book by West-Indian-born author Shiva Naipaul. By recounting his tour of a “New Age” cultural fair, Naipaul aimed to show that Peoples Temple was the likely product of a culture where rational discourse had been engulfed by an orgiastic search for self-fulfillment stemming from naive utopian wishes to transcend confrontation with life in a morally uneven world.7

Few American observers took the path of such sweeping cultural criticism. Spokespersons for social groups potentially most “tainted” by the stigma of Jonestown—leftists, Blacks, and Christians, as well as political notables who had lent moral support to the group—sought to put as much distance as possible between themselves and Peoples Temple. Socialists argued that Jones’s religious origins and charismatic style belied his radical claims. Black leaders suggested that there was racism in the acts of a White charlatan of a prophet who led their brothers and sisters astray. Chagrined at the Temple’s affiliation with the Disciples of Christ, Christian commentators emphasized the blasphemy of Jones’s contempt for the Bible.

From the corridors of government offices and the Disciples of Christ came the predictable bureaucratic responses: investigate the adequacy of performance of duty by organizational personnel, reprimand or punish those guilty of malfeasance, and modify policies as if to safeguard against a repeat occurrence. Among a whole raft of such investigations, none found much culpability among the living. Nor, other than the debacle of murder and suicide at the end, did they find much under their jurisdictions that could be counted as crimes by Peoples Temple or its members. And when government reports addressed popular cultural concerns, most of their findings affirmed what had already been reported, both in California in a series of exposes before the Peoples Temple migrated en masse to Guyana in 1977, and in accounts that greeted the public after November 18, 1978.8

The mass media, not government reports, shaped public knowledge about Peoples Temple. In the wake of the carnage, media executives apparently could see no end to the public thirst for exposes of what “really happened.” Along with all the newspaper and magazine articles, they produced no less than one film, one CBS television docudrama, and sixteen popular books on Peoples Temple in four years. It was by this process that the public cultural meanings of Jonestown became established.

Virtually without exception the popular accounts amounted to morality plays. Collectively they portrayed psychological terror, strange punishments, sexual license, intimidation, and shady economic dealings of Peoples Temple in a way that must come close to defining the “atrocities tale” as a literary genre. Challenging the lurid accounts, religious scholar Jonathan Smith sounded a call for “looking at Jonestown rather than staring or
looking away.” His “preliminary attempt” at explaining Jonestown reasoned by analogy from Greek antiquity that “the most proximate responsibility for the events of White Night [mass suicide] was [Congressman Leo] Ryan’s.” But Smith’s proposed “quest for intelligibility” did not effectively counter the comforting popular view that neither Jones nor his followers really believed in the religiously founded socialism he claimed to promote. Jones was made out to be a megalomaniac and a madman who compromised his followers through blackmail and brainwashing to obtain their commitment not to a political and religious viewpoint but to his own personal rulership. In this view Jones was a fiend who plotted the deaths of his followers for reasons so perverse as to lie beyond rational discourse. As the most thoroughly researched of the popular books succinctly put it, “Blame for the Jonestown tragedy must ultimately come to rest in the deranged personality of Jim Jones.”

Certainly the popular interpreters of Jonestown did not have much difficulty coming up with evidence of the evil they saw in Jim Jones. Let us picture the leader of Peoples Temple seated on his “throne” in the jungle pavilion in the middle of the night, listening to testimonials from Jonestown residents about what they would do if their relatives invaded the community. One man thinks he would butcher his family like hogs; another wants to poison a relative, cut up the body, and feed the poisoned flesh to other relatives so they would die. What kind of leader could put followers up to such improvisation, and whence came his strange and haunting laughter at the recitations? Most people would not have to look for long in the mounds of materials about Peoples Temple to conclude that there was profound evil in Jim Jones. Somehow the popular mind can easily imagine the man, as a 1979 cartoon depicted him, sitting amidst the flames of a fiery hell with Adolf Hitler, the latter exclaiming, “Kool-Aid! Why didn't I think of that!”

Nevertheless, the portrayal of Jones as executioner obscures more than it reveals. To accept at face value the accounts of atrocities served up out of understandable moral outrage at mass death pulls the curtain over Jonestown rather than helping us understand it. There are three basic problems with such an approach.

In the first place, in effect it takes its basic premises from long-standing opponents of Peoples Temple. Their loose-knit organization, eventually called the Concerned Relatives, was tremendously influential in circumscribing the terrain from which the public developed a sustained image of Peoples Temple, beginning in 1977, before the murders and mass suicide. Popular accounts from early reporters onward typically framed interpretations of Peoples Temple in terms of charges by the Concerned Relatives. They thus often uncritically accepted the biases of people who themselves
were in bitter conflict with the group, and who, after the mass suicide, had overwhelming interests in absolving themselves of any responsibility for what happened. Such an approach could not succeed in understanding Jonestown in any event, especially because it failed to examine critically the effects of the opponents' actions themselves—including the visit of Ryan and the Concerned Relatives—on the course of history. Moreover, there is the problem of reflexivity: to the extent that early reporters were participants in events, their own actions are part of the story they purported to "cover." For example, a San Francisco reporter covering Peoples Temple, Tim Reiterman, later (with coauthor John Jacobs) wrote the book that blamed Jonestown on Jones's "deranged personality." Despite this analysis, Reiterman admitted that he was emotionally torn by "guilt that somehow my presence had contributed to the terrible outcome." In short, with opponents helping to frame analysis in ways that pinpointed responsibility elsewhere, and with reporters acting in the unfolding drama, the popular exposés are better understood as events in history than as accounts about history.11

There is a second major difficulty with the formula of the "atrocity tale." It amounts to a pseudoexplanation based on a logically weak premise: the unequivocally tragic outcome of murder and mass suicide is interpreted as the result of evil. This interpretation in turn provides the warrant for assaying the antecedent evil in Jim Jones and Peoples Temple, and the evil that is identified stands for causal proof about origins of the atrocity. This procedure places a particular interpretation on the outcome, blaming it on the dementia of Jones the Anti-Christ, then drawing on that interpretation to select accounts to be strung together into "history." The problem is this: prior "evil" that may have had little or no causal connection to the outcome is taken to foreshadow the final evil, while the significance of events that fall outside those judged as representatively evil may be completely ignored.

Thus, people who remember the early years of Jim Jones and the Temple are given full opportunity to place their recollections within the context of the murders and mass suicide. We learn from them how as a child Jones conducted sacred last rites for deceased pets, and how, as a teenager, he shot a pistol in the direction of a close friend. We are introduced to the possibility that Jones's moving to Indianapolis with his wife Marceline when they were young, and shifting from unsatisfying job to job, marked a tendency of "running," "one of the classic traits of paranoia."12 But we never learn about the prevalence of similar actions by other young people who do not grow up to lead socialistic communities to mass suicide in the jungle. Conversely, even the most widespread conventional practices of staging
everyday life, like the wearing of ministerial robes, become sinister manipulations of people's perceptions at the hands of the Reverend Jim Jones.

The formula of these discourses holds that sufficient antecedent evil will produce an evil outcome, and a great deal of antecedent evil will produce an enormous evil outcome. The dubious logic of the approach is underscored by the comment of Reiterman and Jacobs on the mass suicide: “The worldwide perception alone would prove the last gesture a failure, Jones's closing act a fraud.” In the view of these writers, public “perception” itself is sufficient to establish the nature of events. Thus, public opinion, itself largely dependent on mass media for information, stands as the jury issuing verdicts on history.

The weaknesses of a theory that “evil begets evil” bring us to a third major difficulty. By reducing history to a superficial atrocity tale, the writers who claim to reveal the true story instead place Jonestown beyond the reach of historical analysis. They trivialize an ambiguous tragedy by forcing it into the framework of an “evil-man” theory; then the people who died were simply victims of a “cult.” But only at the hands of the Concerned Relatives and the media did Peoples Temple become a “cult.” As an Indiana woman whose teenager died at Jonestown remarked, “I can't understand why they call the Peoples Temple a cult. To the people, it was their church.”

If the term cult is taken to mean a religious following centered on an individual whose teachings are held to be sacred, then there have been many cults over the centuries, including most prominently the ones that surrounded Jesus, and more recently, Gandhi and Pope John Paul II. Under such a definition, the cult label loses its critical faculty for establishing prima facie evil, for it has to be recognized that there are “good” cults and “bad” cults. But more often, cult is used pejoratively by members of one religion to describe a heretical or competing religion of which they disapprove.

The tale of an evil madman and his cult massacre is simplistic history, nevertheless pregnant with literary possibilities. But we have to wonder why the “atrocity tale” as a literary device of mythmaking has been allowed to substitute for a reasoned analysis of Jonestown and its meaning. Perhaps the events in Jonestown produced unsettling collective questions about cultural dilemmas of the wider society. No doubt there was a strange fascination with mechanisms of seemingly diabolical power and the way the Temple grew like a cancer in the midst of a normal social world. How could the “cancer” feed on normal people, normal organizations and institutions? Did Peoples Temple harness good people to bad ends? Did it “use” organizations by covertly subordinating them to its own purposes? Or,
more disturbing to consider, did Peoples Temple partly reflect the society from which it emerged?

There is no easy answer to such questions. Sociologists and historians have long understood that “facts” do not speak for themselves; sometimes the same set of facts can be “read off” equally well to support radically different interpretations; different sets of facts about the same events can support even more disparate accounts. How, then, to make sense of the conflict of interpretations? No simple formula solves the problem, but we do know that the questions we ask frame the relevance of facts and thus shape the range of interpretations. Just sifting through the popular accounts of Peoples Temple shows that not much insight is gained by the atrocity tale. What approach might prove more fruitful?

Perhaps we need to explore the social processes by which Peoples Temple emerged. Perhaps what happened with Jim Jones and his aides, the Peoples Temple as an organization, its interaction with the outside world, and the trajectory of its history can be better explained on the basis of wider social and cultural currents than by the particular personality of the group’s leader. I suggest that we at least need to entertain this possibility by letting one question serve as a touchstone: how much of what happened with Peoples Temple is unique to the group and its leader, and how much can be explained by reference to wider social processes?

This question cannot be answered simply by looking at Peoples Temple in isolation. Instead, it is necessary to examine its cultural context and its concrete relationships with other social groups. It also becomes relevant to compare Peoples Temple both to a wide range of parallel social phenomena and to sociohistorical models that clarify distinctive social logics (sociologists sometimes call such models “ideal types”). These sorts of investigations help establish the general social processes and wider cultural currents at work in Peoples Temple. What is left over, that which cannot be explained by such comparisons, is the unique residue of Peoples Temple that requires situational historical explanation. For example, the parallels between the wider U.S. practices of public relations and the practices of Peoples Temple need to be established, so that the degree of deviation from social convention can be stated with precision. Similarly, once we understand the charlatan as an ideal type and American practitioner, it will be possible to ask in what respect Jim Jones was a charlatan, and where other explanations of his actions are required. These sorts of procedures do not insure that all factual controversies can be resolved, nor do they rule out conflict of interpretations, but they do sharpen discussion. And they offer the opportunity to understand Jonestown in a way that allows us to explore its relation to our own society and culture.
As we will see, in diverse ways the growth of Peoples Temple was fueled through its relations to our society. Its cataclysmic end crystallized a particular constellation of forces that exposes to our view social processes otherwise hidden. Looking for the meaning of Jonestown beyond the surface facts of atrocity thus offers a unique opportunity: we can bring to light a complex portion of our cultural world that usually is cloaked in normative perceptions of reality. Such an investigation cannot purport to reveal the "essential" nature of our society, nor does it suggest that Peoples Temple is symptomatic of U.S. culture, for it is not a representative sample subject to generalization. But the simple identification of common and unique cultural pathways is a significant step: an assessment of the degree to which Peoples Temple was truly an aberration or simply a unique conjunctural exaggeration of our society's contradictions permits us to deepen our understanding of a modern scapegoat.

This book proceeds in Part I by asking who Jim Jones was, what ideas he had, where he got them, and how his Peoples Temple became established in Indiana during the 1950s and early 1960s. In these explorations I show the origins of Peoples Temple embedded in the career of a man who tapped three basic streams of U.S. culture: Protestantism's split between fundamentalist and social gospel wings; the quests of Black messiahs to offer a promised land to their dispossessed followers; and the pre-McCarthy era U.S. communist movement. By themselves these cultural origins only chart the cultural pathways of Peoples Temple, not its organizational base or situational causes of its historical development. In Part II, I examine the Temple organization that solidified after a collective migration to California in 1965, through relevant comparisons with modern institutionalized practices in the realms of economics and bureaucracy, social control, and public relations and power. Though the Temple's cultural origins derive largely from the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, I show that its social practices have a distinctly modern cast. Thus, Peoples Temple succeeded in the United States largely because it was a distinctly American social movement in its origins and practices. With this recognition, it becomes possible in Part III to trace the situational causes of Peoples Temple's conflict with its detractors, the collective migration to Guyana, and the mass suicide. Both Jones's followers and his opponents sought to act out a drama of history. Examining that history, we can hope to deepen our understandings about the role of myth in modern society. Understanding the role of myth, we can hope to establish Jonestown's cultural significance beyond myth.

Jim Jones has often been dismissed as a madman, but the present study shows that so-called madness, the shared folie of nearly a thousand people,
took form in tension with social circumstance. In the case of Jones, madness was not a private matter; if nothing else, the devastating events bespeak a madness run rampant on a grand scale. But whence the madness? The fate of Jones's followers obliges us to see if Jonestown is intelligible in something other than a morality tale.

A number of observers have found the prototype for the unveiling of Jim Jones and his jungle autocracy in Joseph Conrad's gripping short story "Heart of Darkness," but they sometimes missed Conrad's deep sense of irony. On one level "Heart of Darkness" is the tale of a trading company steamship captain sent on an ominous trip up an African jungle river to a remote trading post held against all odds by one Mr. Kurtz. "He drew men towards him by what was best in them," an unrequited lover would later say of Kurtz. The immense personal magnetism of his insight brought native and White "disciples" alike to embrace a grand but empty vision that led to a ghastly reckoning of truth. Chugging slowly up the steamy jungle river toward Kurtz's trading post, the steamboat captain journeyed a soul's voyage into this repulsive, compelling world of evil. Yet it was Kurtz himself who cried with his last breath, "The horror! The horror!"

Jim Jones easily enough can be understood as the source of Peoples Temple's horror, just as there is no difficulty in finding the heart of darkness in Kurtz. But that is not the end of the matter, for in his origins Kurtz represented civilization brought to the jungle. And Kurtz became evil only by wrestling with fate; he therefore knew both fate and evil as few others ever will. With a dark light he cast a shadow on darkness in the world itself.
PART I
1

Jim Jones

It was Jim Jones who brought people to murder and mass suicide, but who was Jim Jones? Clearly, the man's life and vision raise certain themes that came into play over and over again in the events leading up to the final carnage. By themselves, I argue, these themes do not explain the final debacle. But the outlook of Jones was like a picture frame around a world where a multitude of hopes and fears, plans, ploys, and agendas came to a head.

Some observers would paint a coherent picture of Jones as the AntiChrist. Others, among them a few followers who survived Jonestown, believe he was a saint. Perhaps Jones was both, for he was no ordinary man, and the multiple facets of his life reflected a volatile set of contradictions onto his followers and detractors alike. This and the following two chapters explore the frame of Peoples Temple's world by considering the early life and ministerial calling of Jones, by asking what, if anything, there was to the philosophy of the would-be messiah, and by pondering claims that he was a charlatan, a fraud, or a madman.¹

Hoosier Parents

Some people are born into wealth; others at least inherit a socially defined place in the world. Jim Jones had neither. He was born an outsider at the height of the Great Depression, in the Indiana farm village of Crete, in overwhelmingly rural Randolph County, along the Ohio border.

Randolph County had its origins in the arrival of pioneers who settled the first colony of the United States, the Old Northwest Territory. In the early 1800s they filtered north from Kentucky, Tennessee, and North Carolina, and beginning in the 1820s they streamed west along the National Road. For the most part the settlers were at least nominally Protestant. Sometimes they were self-consciously religious. The very first pioneers to settle Randolph County included Quakers who left the piedmont areas of North and South Carolina. Some of them were proslavery, and other proslavery migrants from the South settled eastern Indiana too, by moving up

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the valley of the Whitewater River from its mouth at the Ohio River. But in
the antebellum years, many Quakers opposed slavery, and some estab­
lished stations on the Underground Railroad to help slaves escape from
their owners.\textsuperscript{2}

Underground Railroad activity seems to have had an effect on the com­
position of the area: by 1860, at the beginning of the Civil War, Randolph
County had the highest proportion of Blacks compared to total county
population of any county in Indiana, with a total of 825 settled in a series
of small communities away from the major towns. After the Civil War the
Black population began to decline as younger Blacks abandoned farm life
for the cities.

By 1930 the Randolph County population had settled into a relatively
stable pattern. The 24,858 inhabitants were 98.9 percent White and native
born. Immigrants, mostly from Germany and Canada, made up about half
a percent of the population. The remaining half a percent were Blacks, only
136. Even by 1951 there were no Jews, and only a remarkably small 2.6 per­
cent of the population were Catholics. The county where Jim Jones was
born thus bore the indelible stamp of a White Protestant culture of
Quakers, Methodists, Baptists, and other such denominations, with south­
ern as well as northern origins.\textsuperscript{3}

An apocryphal story popular among Kentuckians today has it that the
Indiana term \textit{Hoosier} comes from the question posed by early settlers to
one another, trying to pin down origins and social position: \textit{"Who's yer
parents?"} Perhaps with justification people of the Hoosier State dispute
that story, but it is a telling one for Jim Jones, for it underscores his
marginal origins. James Warren Jones was born on May 13, 1931, the only
child of James T. and Lynetta Putnam Jones. The father was one of twelve
children from a prominent Randolph County family of farmers and
schoolteachers, descendants of early Baptist settlers from Virginia and
Quakers from Pennsylvania. The mother viewed her husband’s family as
“bigoted” and closed minded. “They were just not broad minded about
anything,” Lynetta later complained. “They would pick out these facts,
and these was the facts and that was the way it was.”\textsuperscript{4}

For all the resentment Lynetta Jones felt toward pretensions of social
position and scholastic elitism in her husband’s family, she could not fault
her husband on those grounds. Despite his family’s upstanding social posi­
tion, “big Jim” never amounted to much. In the World War he had re­
cieved a lung injury from mustard gas, and he took up the life of a disabled
veteran upon his return. A government check made him a man of meager
means, but the war injury left him an “invalid” and a “very bitter, cynical
person” in the recollection of his son.
Big Jim, Lynetta, and their only child left their forty- or sixty-acre farm at Crete when they could no longer make a go of it in the height of the Great Depression, probably in 1933 or 1934. They moved to a house next to the railroad tracks in the nearby town of Lynn, which in 1930 had a population of 936, two train lines, and a going casket industry. In these environs James T. Jones spent a good deal of time hanging out at the local pool hall, garnering what respect he could as an old-timer who had served his country. According to a journalism professor who grew up in Lynn, big Jim also belonged to the Ku Klux Klan.5

Even before they moved from the farm, the father of Jim Jones seems to have reached the point of life defeat, and it was Lynetta who took responsibility for the family of three, taking what jobs she could pick up, including housework for her neighbors across the Arba Pike. “Finally when everything just seemed to run out” on the farm, she remembers her husband “would slump there, and just, ‘I’ve done all I can do.’ He’d burst into tears. ‘I’ve gone as far as I can go.’” The small and wiry Lynetta looked at him with quiet determination: “You cry, my love; I’ll whip this [Great Depression] if it’s the last thing I ever do.”

Lynetta Jones felt little in common with her husband’s family: “Some of them harbored a poorly concealed notion that being as fit and able as I was in the skills of survival was unbefitting a female of my size and stature and somehow detracted from the thing they called respectibility.” A woman with straight black hair and purported Cherokee Indian blood, she hailed from Gibson County, near the Wabash River in the southwestern corner of Indiana. She was born to Mary Putnam, a woman from Kentucky married to a tenant farmer named Jesse Putnam. When Lynetta’s father died, their landlord, a local landowner and stave-mill owner named Lewis Parker became the girl’s “foster father,” apparently when she was little more than a child.6

Always down to earth, Lynetta Jones spoke in the archaic southern piedmont accent prevalent in southern Indiana, with the same colloquial expressions, run-on sentence grammar, and clipped phrasing that were to mark her son’s “backstage” voice all his life. She obtained some education, at an Arkansas agricultural college and a business college in Indiana, but neither her formal schooling nor the station she attained in her married life rewarded her with the social position that she felt her due. Trapped in poverty and living with a husband with whom, she later recounted, she did not share a bed, Lynetta worked in tomato fields and at factory jobs. During World War II she began commuting to a job with Perfect Circle Corporation in nearby Hagerstown. There Lynetta not only earned a wage but also helped organize workers in the class struggle of labor by night. Her
resentment thus found a focus in the privileges of class and her own low station. She struggled mightily for the only child born to her, for whom she desperately wanted better circumstances: “My ambition for my son knew no bounds!” she once explained. Another of her turns of phrase was more foreboding: “I didn’t want him to devote his life to just being a slave to the death interest in people.”

Jim Jones’s father had little influence on him, except as an example of failure. The boy was reared as Lynetta’s son. He picked up a great many of his mother’s ways, and carried them with him in his whole life and work. To begin with, Lynetta’s religious legacy was less than conventional. She was a rough and ready woman who smoked and cursed and drank. She mocked people like the Joneses’ neighbor in Lynn, Mrs. Kennedy, who Lynetta believed took religion too seriously.

Mrs. Kennedy was a member of the Church of the Nazarene, a Holiness sect opposed to consumption of alcohol and use of tobacco. The Nazarenes had formed at the turn of the century by consolidating several Holiness movement groups. These groups had split off earlier from the Methodist Episcopal Church out of dissatisfaction with the Methodists’ emphasis on the social gospel and their suppression of the rollicking camp-meeting-revival worship style in vogue since the beginning of the nineteenth century. As Lynetta Jones put it, the Nazarene Mrs. Kennedy believed in “the hellfire and damnation and on all the brimstone that went with it.” From that churchly perspective, Lynetta suspected the opinion that she herself “was going to hell straighter than a bird could fly.” But Lynetta only laughed at her friend, and tried to set her straight: “Well Myrtle, you’re just all tied up with this. . . . No matter what you think it says, it don’t say nothing as ignorant as that.”

The mother of Jim Jones was not too taken with the idea of a “sky god” in heaven, but she believed in spirits nonetheless. They abounded in the world and its creatures and their visions. Lynetta always had loved the woods and wild animals and she even had been “rather fond of snakes since early childhood.” The penchant for animals sometimes shaded off into realms of fantasy. Lynetta lived in a somewhat magical world. No sky god, but in the world enchantment lay in the stories of animals, in visions, and in spirits that possess humans. Jim Jones seems to have picked up his mother’s sense of the divine but inexplicable forces of animism. Like her, he was derisive about the “sky god” but believed in forces that shape a world of fate beyond human control.

According to Lynetta’s later account, even the birth of her son was shrouded in deep and mystical circumstances. She had been on the verge of death once, before she was married. Typhoid fever took her mother’s life in 1925, and attacked Lynetta a year later. Her fever came on in the woods,
where she awoke “eyeball to eyeball with snakes of all sizes, with some eggs just hatching.” Somehow she made it home, where she lived with her foster father Lewis Parker, by then in his late 60s. When Lynetta’s fever peaked four weeks later, she recalled, she “seemed to go down to the Egyptian River of Death and look it over. . . . There was an Egyptian burial box which could be used as a boat, I thought, and a plank that could be used as a paddle. My mother walked out on the other shore.” “You are not permitted to cross that river yet,” her mother told Lynetta in the dream. “There are two very important things you must do before you come here. Your world is so full of sorrow and sadness, and Lew needs you now that he is old.” In the dream, Lynetta recounted, “I turned to retrace my steps,” and “came to the bed where the sick woman was and found I was the sick woman.”

Lynetta’s strength rebounded upon awakening. She took care of the aging Lew Parker, married James T. Jones, and took her foster father to live with her new husband. “My mind was made up long in advance,” she later recalled, “that my child should be exactly like Lewis Parker even though he was no blood kin.” Five years later Lynetta gave birth to a little boy who had brown eyes just like Parker’s, “though both my husband and myself had blue eyes.” A little over a year later Lewis Parker died back in southwestern Indiana, and Lynetta Jones provided the information for the death certificate.

Lynetta Jones later said she had not wanted to marry or bear children. In her recollections, she raised innuendoes about the paternity of her son Jim Jones. The child was born of a feverish vision that linked her dead mother’s wishes with the fate of Lewis Parker, the family landlord and patron who Lynetta said was “the most outstanding character I had ever met in my life.” Her only child had more than the brown eyes of his “godfather”; Lynetta later would proclaim him to reflect the goodness that she saw in Parker: “Nothing was too much for him to do to relieve poverty and need, trouble and unhappiness, wherever he found it,” she said of the man nearly fifty years her senior.9

Hoosier Boy

Lynetta Jones had desperately wanted a boy but she was not prepared for the baby who “entered this vale of tears.” He “looked like every nation out in the world but his own, and a little bit of his own too.” She thought, “God forbid, this is gonna be one of the ugliest children.” But she doted over him and indulged him all the same. The child got a bad case of “three months’ colic,” Lynetta recalled: “I was constantly tormented over him, and the fact is my insecurity because of my fear that I didn’t know how to handle
him and how to raise him or rear him right or something, and he was so important to me that I was just beside myself in the rearing of him.”

Perhaps because of her anxiety, Lynetta Jones did little to bridle the child, and “he just about always got his way about whatever he wanted to do.” Around town he had the reputation of a little hellion. He could walk around without clothes. He brought animals home and his mother would care for them. He brought tramps home and she would feed them. Eventually he would charge items at the grocery store without permission and his mother resigned herself to paying the bill. She could not give him a “lickin’” for any of his misdeeds, she said. If she tried, little Jim would let out a screech that brought the household menagerie to his side and bowled her over.

The boy's mother did not have a great deal of time to supervise her child in the first place. She brought her husband and son through the “awful times” of the Depression by working long hours and pinching every penny. As her son put it, “I had less of material comforts, although my mother made every effort to give me what she could.” Even in the midst of poverty she managed to save money for young Jim's college, hoping for more for him than she had. Lynetta possessed that old-time virtue of thrift that had been learned of necessity, if nothing else, by the early settlers. Jim admired his mother for it, saying in Jonestown at her death in 1977 that she knew “how to make a dollar go. I learned that from her. . . . You can be sure I learned how to make a dollar stretch, and it's a damn good thing, or we wouldn't all be eating right now.” Like his mother, Jones held down consumption and harnessed cash flow to the accumulation of savings all his life, in a way that mimicked what the sociologist Max Weber once termed “the ascetic compulsion to save” among Puritans and Quakers.10

Lynetta Jones passed on much of her practical and earthy “religion” of animism, spirit forces, and frugality to her son, but her own ways could not quite contain her son's spiritual odyssey. The Nazarene Mrs. Kennedy and other neighbors exposed the boy to the range of respectable religious experience available in Lynn, including the Methodist Church and the pacifist Quaker meeting of his father's family. Mrs. Kennedy was the mainstay; she would “fox him up and take him to the Sunday school and church and all this sort of thing.” But the next thing Lynetta knew, a woman from the local Pentecostal church came calling for young Jim.

The Pentecostal groups had arisen as an almost inevitable extension of the Holiness movement that spawned Mrs. Kennedy's Nazarenes. Waiting for the millennium in the 1890s, Holiness leaders searched for a “new Pentecost,” in which believers would receive definitive proof of their own salvation in the Holy Spirit, just as the apostles of Jesus had, according to the New Testament's Acts 2, on the seventh Sunday after Easter. In 1906 in
Los Angeles a Black Baptist preacher named Seymour claimed to re-discover the proof of grace. He promoted a doctrine of glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, originally set forth by the Reverend Charles Fox Parham of Kansas. Seymour thus served as a major catalyst for the Pentecostal movement: in the revival on Los Angeles's Azusa Street that was to continue unabated, sometimes night and day, for three years, speaking in tongues became established as the definitive material sign of salvation.

On Azusa Street the movement was racially integrated: Whites, often putting aside deep racial prejudices, sought the laying on of Black hands in order to become filled with the Holy Spirit. During the early phases of Pentecostalism's rapid growth, interracial worship remained common, but by the 1920s social pressures in the South led to virtually complete segregation of the various Pentecostal denominations.

Pentecostalists were disdained by the more conventional denominations, and sometimes denounced and persecuted, even by fundamentalists, for their immoderate practices, their sometimes outrageous claims about supernatural balls of fire and the like, and their crusades against churches that could not heal, allegedly because they were lost in unbelief. In general the Pentecostal sects attracted the dispossessed and marginal elements of society, sharecroppers, tenant farmers, unorganized factory wage earners, and others who banded together in communities where they could better survive collectively in a changing world from which they often felt excluded.

One of the most interesting analyses of Pentecostal groups, that of W. J. Hollenweger, suggests that they thrived especially among the disenfranchised and the “poor in spirit” who could not easily contend with an increasingly alien, rationalized world. Such people feared being made fun of by outsiders who would be astounded at their inability to contend with modern civilization. In the comfort of their congregations they could express their own social needs “liturgically,” that is, in the vocabulary of salvation. While they prayed for the redemption of the Second Coming, Pentecostalists could practice a form of social welfare in a community that operated outside established channels of charity.

As a boy, Jim Jones went to Pentecostal services where they praised God in enthusiastic and unregimented ways, looking to be filled with the Holy Spirit in immediate ecstatic possession of the charismatic gifts described in the book of Acts. Lynetta Jones felt the woman who came to take young Jim to the services was “a zealot” who “got savage in her determination to hang on to” him: she had the boy out at a poor country church “made from scraps o' professionals' [materials]”; she put the boy of eight or ten up in the pulpit, as a “drawing card and a fundraising thing,” and she “hauled him all over the country” on the revival circuit. Religious ecstasy took its
toll. When Jim Jones began to jerk in agony in his sleep, “felt snakes and things like this,” Lynetta decided it was enough of the “holy roller” business. One day when the woman appeared “with the devil looking out of her eyes,” to take Jim to services, Lynetta chased her off, and kept her son at home. But for his mother’s intervention, young Jim Jones might have lived the life of a child prophet like the boy marvel Marjoe Gortner.

Decisive as it was, Lynetta’s rescue of her son from the throes of Pentecostalism came too late: Jim Jones already was long lost to the fascination of religion. “I recognized that my father was infinite spirit,” Jones later recalled the revelation to a ten-year-old. As a young boy, Jim imitated his formal religious experiences by conducting play church services in the loft above the garage. There, in what he called “God’s House,” the boy experienced the awe of personal power that derives from religious office, for he established a realm where he was boss, and he managed to cajole even some of the tougher neighborhood kids into playing the parts of his parishioners. “Those that never went to church anywhere else, they’d come to his church, ‘cause he’d tell ‘em, that was the thing to do.” If they insulted “God’s House,” or “if they’d get smart with him, he’d just rip the lard out of ‘em.” Jones’s childhood services thus offered full vent to a sense of righteous indignation that warranted the use of force against sinners, recalcitrants, and detractors. Lynetta Jones remembers “doing a little eavesdropping” on Sunday mornings. “He’d point out incidences where they’d done this and that and the other thing. He’d say, ‘there ain’t no use to deny it; I know y’done it,’” when no one else in town knew. Pushed to explain this kind of divination, Lynetta allowed that her boy “got around like the dandelions do, y’know. But without a doubt he did have these, ah, revelations.”

Jim Jones also learned the rewards of acting the cherub. The boy would cut flowers out of a neighbor’s yard to place on the altar in “God’s House” or to take to the sick. “He could tell when people was troubled, things like that,” his mother recalled. One time, she remembered, Jim wandered into a church “half naked and with all his dogs and animals behind him” and presented flowers to a congregation that rippled with laughter at the gesture. “The preacher got so confounded mad, he says, ‘I don’t want to hear any more funny business. . . . There’s more religion in one little finger of this child than there is in the whole town. . . . You have something in your midst that’s a crackling gift from heaven.’”

Despite her disdain for the “sky god,” Lynetta Jones had enough sense of religion to take pride in her son’s precocious gifts of the spirit. Still, she did not think he would be a minister when he grew up. For all her talk of devils and visions, she was a hardheaded woman when it came to the social question. Like other class-conscious members of the industrial proletariat,
Lynetta Jones saw “holy rollers” grasping for salvation in an ecstasy that ignored the real economic forces shaping workers’ fate. If she had a faith, it was that of a “humanitarian” labor organizer: “I was never idle under these same principles that he [Jim Jones] would work on today [about 1974]. But I wouldn’t put names on it. I saw people being exploited; that’s where I was to try and see that didn’t happen.”

While Lynetta Jones struggled against the interests of management, she refused to acknowledge their superiority; in the little town of Lynn, she supposed “there was even what mighta called theirselves a social elite, which I didn’t pay no heed to: who was socially elite and who wasn’t.” But her son apparently did notice: “He said they always tried to downgrade him.” Her own steamy resentment of her supposed betters seems to have rubbed off on him. From all accounts, young Jim Jones did well enough in school, “when he was interested,” as Lynetta put it. But he was an outsider, who turned into a rebel because, as he said later, he was born “on the wrong side of the tracks,” and therefore “was never accepted.”

Jim Jones participated in the evolution of his own alienation. Spoiled and obstinate from infancy, he invited rejection by the cultivation of rude manners and a certain mean streak. By the age of six, he was walking down the streets of Lynn, shouting obscenities. Despite his mother’s concern for him and the neighbors’ interest in his religious culture, Jones later said he “didn’t have any love given to me; I didn’t know what the hell love was.” With his mother out working to earn their keep, he felt abandoned at a school function when “everybody’s fucking parent was there but mine.” Likewise, the boy found he was “going to all the churches and still not being accepted.”

Only the Pentecostal church impressed him. There he recalled he found something he found nowhere else, a “setting of freedom of emotion.” Nor was it lost on Jones that this one source of warmth came from “the most despised rejects of the community.” These members of the social outgroup gave him a spiritual home, and though he claimed he “intellectually out-grew” their religion, he recognized their emotional bonds as a haven from the coldness of the world, formed on the basis of a freedom that came from collective alienation from conventional society.

In his high school years Jim Jones dressed decently, succeeded in school, and dated respectable girls. A number of fellow students remember him as “quiet” and “reserved.” They knew he was serious about religion, although one girl remembered that “he never tried to push it on anyone. He wasn’t a fanatic. He was popular, but he wasn’t a leader.”

Jim Jones’s increasingly studious and upwardly mobile posture promised to fulfill his mother’s hopes for her only child. He continued an earlier pattern of reading widely, and he studied religion, medicine, and world
affairs. At the end of his junior year, his mother and father finally separated after years of an estranged relationship. Young Jim moved with his mother to Richmond, seventeen miles south of Lynn, where she began dating a mechanic whose marriage was on the skids. From Richmond it seemed Jones eventually would enter into some professional training, perhaps related to medicine. As the Richmond high school yearbook put it when he graduated in 1949, “Jim’s six-syllable medical vocabulary astounds us all.”

But the outward success in high school belies a consistent inner struggle Jim Jones experienced up to and into those years. Both the accounts of people who knew him and his own reminiscences in the fall of 1977 reveal the meaningful linkages between his character as a youth and the embattled Peoples Temple of the late 1970s. In his memory, while he was growing up there were really only two significant kinds of people—those who were against him, and those who were with him. Apart from his Pentecostal experience, Jones found precious few people who befriended him in a meaningful way. He often got into feuds with authorities. One time, he remembered his first grade teacher’s labeling him “abnormal” for having “the hots” for a little girl named Mildred. In the fifth grade, a teacher “shamed” and “berated” him for supposedly cheating.

By both his own account and as others remember him, Jim Jones was an aggressive type: “I was ready to kill by the end of the third grade. I mean, I was so fucking hostile and aggressive, I was ready to kill.” By the sixth grade, Jones grandly recalled, he “was considered the big, bad, mean motherfucker.” He said that one summer day that year he had found a “rich kid” bullying kids at the swimming hole, holding their heads under water; Jim turned the tables on the boy, and “damned near drowned him.”

When people tried to challenge Jim Jones on his conduct, he either turned and amplified aggression against them or he ran away. His recollections made in 1977 suggest that from early in his childhood, he carried a good-sized chip on his shoulder and expected people to mistreat him. When he entered the fourth grade classroom for the first time, he recalled thinking, “Okay bitch, do what all the rest of them do, make an ass out of me.” He hated the public embarrassment he felt when teachers faulted him on academic performance, and he sometimes took revenge by devious routes. One opponent seems to have tried to break Jim of his aggression by responding in kind: his male sixth grade teacher supposedly tried to force him out a second-story window; the boy got loose but still received a “whaling” in the principal’s office. The whole incident was too much for him, and he ran away to his aunt’s in Logansport, only to be confronted with the indignity of parents who did not care to come and get him.
Another time, in high school, Jones said a teacher called him out because his “workbook wasn’t neat enough.” The woman went on to criticize the girl behind him for being too poor to wear clean socks, and finished up by “brag[ging] on this prissy assed . . . rich kid: ‘His workbook’s so neat.’” As Jones later described his own response, he secretly stole all the workbooks to take revenge against a “grading system . . . correlated with the class system.”

The incidents may be only isolated, and some of Jones's stories may be apocryphal, but they all fit together in his memory. As a child, Jim was “White trash,” suffered for it, and had to fight for the dignity of it, both with his peers and with his teachers. In this alien world inhabited by hostile authority figures and well-to-do sissies and bullies, a few people stood out in his mind as different. Those who complimented him, who supported him, who accepted him, he deemed in memory wise and warm. One teacher did not treat him as an outcast; instead she told him, “if anybody can be a leader, you must be.” Jones regarded the woman as “a catalyst for a sense of loyalty.” Likewise, he remembered the solidarity of his high school gang. “They were the motliest crew in the fucking town. I had the sickest ones, the craziest ones.” They were “never invited to any of the socialite affairs,” but young Jones stole supplies so they could have parties in style.

Later, when he moved to Richmond before finishing high school, Jim Jones recalled how he worked as an orderly at Reid Memorial Hospital and neglected to charge poor patients for supplies used in their care. He praised the head nurse because “she covered for me, and she knew I was doing that shit.” Looking back on his youth, Jones thought well of those who stood up for him, stood with him, saw his “true” motives, and covered for him in the face of opponents. He had come to value power and loyalty.

The same concerns marked his youthful sense of international politics. His mother warned him not to “throw your pearls before swine,” but her son dabbled with fascist ideas. He also became enamored of Stalin and the Soviets because of their heroic stand against the Nazis at Stalingrad. Jones was led to begin reading about communism when the United States turned against the Soviet government at the end of World War II. As he later described his reaction to the U.S. policy shift, “This is one loyal fucker; you don’t just twist me and turn me like that.”

The autobiographical accounts of the young Jim Jones's feuds and loyalties on a personal and international scale must be understood as part psychological projection onto his memory by a man who by 1977 was deeply immersed in similar kinds of social struggles. But the accounts also happen to echo similar chords of resentment in Jones's mother about her husband's family, about her proletarian status, and about the social elite of
Lynn. Jones was caught from birth in the modern industrial wasteland of capitalism—the Great Depression. His mother gave him to believe that he was every bit as good as the next person, but his status in the social world of White Protestant Indiana told him otherwise. A world of righteousness could be gauged only by his personal station in it. Like his mother, and even at an early age, Jones deeply resented his social fate. He had no ready place in the world. He did not even have the substantial support of family and community that people of privilege (and even the established poor) could fall back upon when the going got rough. Nor was Lynetta’s son predisposed to any kind of physical labor. As his mother put it, “He didn’t know nothing about that; if he did, he kept it in the dark.”

Jim Jones would have to live by his wits. If he was to fulfill his mother’s hopes for him, he would have to pull himself up by the bootstraps. He did so by a route well traveled for such purposes among the wavering masses from the rural mid-South: he became a minister.
References


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