

# SCHOOL OF MISSION AND THEOLOGY IN STAVANGER

“WHAT WENT WRONG WITH THE PEOPLES TEMPLE?”

A closer look at Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple

MASTER THESIS

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By

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**CONTENTS**

- 1 Introduction .....4
- 1.1 Why did I choose to study this subject? .....4
- 2 Methodology .....6
- 2.1 Textual Studies .....6
- 2.2 What Kind of Sources? .....7
- 2.3 Ethical Considerations .....8
- 2.4 Distancing and perceptions .....9
- 2.5 Translating Meaning When Relating to the NRM .....9
- 3 Jim Jones and the Founding of the Temple .....12
- 3.1 Timeline for the Peoples Temple .....12
- 3.2 James Warren Jones and his Family Background .....13
- 3.3 Jones and his Impact on the Temple .....15
- 3.3.1 Father Divine as the Inspiration for Jim Jones .....16
- 3.4 Jim Jones Clinging to his leadership-role .....16
- 4 Members .....18
- 4.1 Who Joined .....18
- 4.1.2 Other members and the Interpersonal Relations in the Temple .....23
- 4.1.3 Everybody was to be treated equally .....24
- 4.2 Society had failed them .....25
- 4.2.1 Returning to the United States was not an option .....26
- 5 P.T. in a politico-religious context .....28
- 5.1 Peoples Temple as a Political Religion .....30
- 5.2 The Responsibility of the churches .....31
- 5.3 A Millennium Movement? .....32
- 5.4 Models of cult innovation .....33
- 5.4.1 Methods for isolation .....35
- 5.5 Jones impatient towards dissenting opinions.....36
- 5.5.1 The Illusion of Authority .....37
- 5.6 Peoples Temple as a Cult .....38
- 5.6.1 Jim Jones as the “Provider” for his Members .....40
- 5.6.2 The Focus directed at one person .....41
- 5.6.3 Jim Jones as “Father” .....42

5.7 Coercive Persuasion .....	44
5.8 Humanitarian and political engagements .....	45
5.8.1 Humanitarian Work .....	45
5.8.2 “If you are Hungry, you Need to Eat” .....	46
5.8.3 Political commitment .....	47
5.8.4 The Paradox of Their Lack of Power .....	48
5.8.5 The reactions from Contemporaries .....	49
6 Was Peoples Temple Christian? .....	51
6.1 Defining the term “Christian” .....	51
6.2 The uniqueness of African-American majority in the Temple .....	54
6.3 Black Religion .....	58
6.3.1 Call and response .....	58
6.3.2 African Traditions within the Temple .....	59
6.3.3 Weak-minded? .....	61
7 Why did they commit suicide? .....	63
7.1 Under siege .....	63
7.2 Defectors and concerned relatives .....	64
7.3 Quarrels within the Temple .....	65
7.3.1 White Nights Prior to November 18 1978 .....	66
7.4 Arguments with US Authorities .....	67
7.4.1 Media involvement .....	68
7.5 Mass suicide or mass murder? .....	70
8 Discussion .....	72
8.1 Social Action .....	72
8.2 The Religious Human .....	73
8.2.1 What did the Temple have to offer them? .....	75
8.3 What went wrong? .....	75
8.4 And what could be done to avoid such tragedies in the future? .....	76
9 Conclusion .....	77
Bibliography .....	79
Articles .....	80

# 1 Introduction

*There is a refrain commonly sung during black worship services: “Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place.” I never hear this refrain but what I remember is the feeling of being in a holy place<sup>1</sup>*

## **1.1 Why did I choose to study this subject?**

Cults and new religious movements have always been some kind of leisure activity for me, in the sense that I have taken interest in how they work, the personalities involved in both leadership and “down on the floor”, which means the whole spectrum of people that are in the machinery. Peoples Temple was a new religious movement that from the moment I heard about it, seemed very interesting and caught my curiosity a great deal. The idea that a group of people would commit some sort of collective suicide sounded to me almost unreal. I wanted to know some more about how this could come to pass, so my search for an answer started on the internet where I found many web-pages made by survivors, relatives and others who are just interested in this subject, like I am.

Jim Jones may have been doing many good deeds within the American community, but as Charles A. Krause writes:

Whatever his messianic appeal, whatever his high-minded idealism, whatever his good works and his effort to build God’s kingdom on earth, he will be remembered now as an insane and tragic man. He saw himself as an incarnation of Christ and Lenin. In death, he more resembles Lucifer.<sup>2</sup>

Upon discovering this cult, I did not pay much interest to how it was founded, but the kind of destruction it had faced in its end. 918 people had to pay with their lives when this organization committed a “self-destruct” due to one single leader who apparently had problems on the personal level. It is to many an enigma that they were able to go this far simply because one man ordered them to do so. Mockery and stigmatizing have been the reaction of some people who think that the ones who ended up in this cult were either “dumb” or in some other way not normal functioning souls. The critics who say this, are in the belief that nobody in their right mind would join these kinds of organizations, and to some extent they feel a kind of superiority towards the “fools” in Jonestown. My interest in this particular matter was to show that the victims in this tragedy were not in general to be considered weak-

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<sup>1</sup> Sawyer 2004; 189

<sup>2</sup> Krause 1978; 2

mindless or less intelligent, but that there were instead a whole lot of factors that made them step into the sphere of influence from James Warren (Jim) Jones.

The fact that the Peoples Temple (PT), at least from an outside perspective, claimed to be a Christian church or denomination is also something that is a matter of controversy, since some people who have not looked into the details of this “congregation” use this as an example of the crimes committed in the name of Jesus and Christianity. In the beginning, before reading the material especially from the black religious community and how they regarded Peoples Temple, it was quite easy for me to say that the Temple was not a Christian denomination or organization. However, that might not be quite right, and I have learned from my reading that I need to make a distinction between “Father” Jones and his followers. This is both in the regard of treating the persons involved as human beings, and the fact that they were not a homogenous mass, and that many of them have indeed stated their Christian faith, like Leslie Wagner-Wilson who writes “My faith was still strong and no matter what Jim said about him being God, I knew I had God in me also.”<sup>3</sup> Jim Jones on the other hand, is quite another story, and it is difficult to place him within the sphere of Christian faith. He would use all kinds of reasonings in his sermons, from socialist philosophies to UFOs and extraterrestrial beings. Especially the fact that he was drawn to the idea of reincarnation and the cult of UFOs makes him difficult to define as anything other than a syncretist at best, and a swindler at worst. I have heard the claim that the Christian faith could be held responsible for taking the lives of the members of the Peoples Temple and Congressman Leo Ryan along with the journalists and concerned relatives who travelled along with him to Jonestown. There are many places where you can put the blame for this tragedy, and it is not quite right to hold the Christian religion solely responsible for this cult that ended in the mass murders/suicides that fateful Saturday in 1978.

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<sup>3</sup> Wagner-Wilson 2008; 1.

## **2 Methodology**

### **2.1 Textual Studies**

All in all, this study is a textual one, and that will have influence on what methodological considerations I do in respect to my research. In general, my challenge has been that I have been reading several different books focusing on the problem addressed in this thesis. This leads to the advantage that my material is available in the now, and I can easily go back in the books, the library, the internet, etc. and find the information that I have been given by my sources. There is no use in a recording device or having to deal with informants, and therefore my collecting of information is not bound by time and space other than what is used to find the texts.

However, there is the challenge that the authors write the books out of their own preferences, personalities and personal agendas.<sup>4</sup> In my research, I have to consider where the author is coming from, and from what perspective he or she is writing. Not that the author's perspectives are invaluable, they are indeed to be reckoned, but blindly accepting what every author writes as the full truth, will be failing the demands for a scientific approach to the subject. The perspective of the authors are to be considered, but one have to keep in mind that it is their own perspective.

Another thing which is natural to consider, is in what context the book or text has been written. Time is essential in this matter because a book written by an author in for example 1978, he or she will be close to the event in respect to time, and if he had the access to former members, concerned relatives and other witnesses who were close to the events surrounding PT and Jonestown, the book or article will no doubt be characterized by this. Not to mention if the author himself is a survivor or relative. The emotions and ways of putting words, will surely be characterized by how attached the author is to the Temple or Jonestown tragedy with regards to time and space. There is of course also the problem with relating to the multiple types of personalities that the authors try to describe, both from the perspective of the author himself and the person(s) he is trying to describe. We all have our "luggage" when it comes to personal traits and how this relates to persons with personalities different from our own.

In my work, I must also have some kind of format for how the information I get from and about my written sources can be categorized and put to use in the research. One of the areas this is surely to be used, is the question of what kinds of people did join this movement.

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<sup>4</sup> Hammersley & Atkinson 2004; 186.

I have also in this process tried to pinpoint the personal preferences of the authors and what interests they have in writing about the subject at hand. Why a person writes what he writes is of course just as important as how he or she writes it!

I consider this research to be done qualitative since I do have to work with a chosen few sources, and the information I get is from analyzing written documents and websites dedicated to this. There is no form being sent out to the persons in question, nor do I conduct any in-debt group interviews. Even though the written pages that I have to work my way through are many, the sources for these are relatively few. This does not stop me from getting a wide variety of perspectives to work with though.

Since I am the one who is writing this thesis, I am also the main interpreter of the scientific materials presented. It is important, however, to balance my own opinion against the material available, since those two may not always be coherent.

## **2.2 What kind of sources?**

I will try to give a little overview of the different kinds of books and other written sources for my research, even though I can not go into the specific of each and every one of my sources, since they are too many to be mentioned.

During the researching, there are several different books involved. Witnesses who have survived the carnage, either because they managed to escape the Temple before it imploded or because they were for some reason unable to travel to the new “Agricultural Community” that Jim Jones had founded deep in the Guyanese Jungle, have written articles and books about the subject. I have one book from an escapee that managed to get out of the commune, but was unable to rescue her mother who was recovering from a lung-cancer surgery when mother and daughter moved to Jonestown. She was a high ranking member that they trusted to travel back to the civilization for an errand, and she seized this window of opportunity to escape.<sup>5</sup>

Another book is written by a survivor who managed to get out of the Temple just in time to save her own life, but losing several close family members including her own father.<sup>6</sup> These books give us their heart-rending stories together with their feeling of loss and survivors guilt. These are personal accounts from people who had been in the lions den and managed to get out of it.

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<sup>5</sup> Layton 1998; 213.

<sup>6</sup> Wagner-Wilson 2008; 96-112.

I should also mention my most extensive book from Tim Reiterman, a journalist who investigated claims from concerned relatives about abuses and beatings within the Temple and in Jonestown. First he gives a chronological account of the Temple's creation and the events leading to the massacre. His worst nightmare probably became reality when Congressman Leo Ryan and several members of the group of Concerned Relatives traveling to Guyana to investigate and help out defectors, were shot and killed by Jim Jones' security forces. He himself got away with only a gunshot wound in the wrist, but witnessed the first ever killing of a US Congressman in the line of duty.

Other books cover the Peoples Temple and/or subjects relating to this. One of the authors takes a Christian perspective and points out that the Jonestown massacre was caused by Satan,<sup>7</sup> while another leans towards the conspiracy theories of a CIA-cover-up.<sup>8</sup> In general, I have found books covering a great deal of the Peoples Temple and the people and critics around it, together with books covering the theoretical parts, like the doctrines and teachings within the Temple, and also theories of cult formation and functioning. Most of my material is books, but some articles are also acquired from the internet.

### ***2.3 Ethical Considerations***

In every research project, you are bound to encounter an ethical part, even when only relating to books and written material. In the matter of my own project, I find that the ethical focus should be on not making my work another rant about the Peoples Temple and the misdeeds carried out during their final moments. A grave matter like this should be treated with proper respect, and of course the whole history of the Temple should be taken into consideration, not just the events in Guyana November 1978.

We are dealing with the histories of real human beings, and many of them shows them from a vulnerable side, and we need to handle this with the proper respect that they deserve, both as humans, and as a party to this story. Each and every one of them experienced the Temple their way, and they have given their version according to how they perceive it, and from their point of view, and we should be thankful for their willingness to expose themselves to the perceptions of the outside world.

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<sup>7</sup> Brown 1997; 43.

<sup>8</sup> Lane 1980; 371.



## **2.4 Distancing and Perceptions**

The matter of how distanced I should be towards the Peoples Temple has to be taken into consideration. Not that it has anything to do with our daily life, but in order to keep my work tidy. There are many different opinions, mine is one, about the PT, and most of them are negative. The fact that people only have their sight on how the cult ended, and not the workings around it, makes judgment from Court of Public Opinion rather harsh, since they do not know or care about the individual efforts that have gone before the destruction of the cult.

I have also found it useful to make a distinction between the followers of Jim Jones and Jim Jones himself. This is mainly because we view Jones as the brain behind the abuses in the organization, and that the members themselves should in general be considered innocent in most of the things that occurred under Jones' leadership. Most of them are to be considered victims and not accomplices to Jim Jones, even though each and every one of us will have to account for his/her own errors.

There is of course also the consideration to be taken that people who knew members of the Temple, or were themselves members of this organization, that are still alive today, and my final text should not be considered disrespectful to them that lost relatives and loved ones or the persons who were themselves killed. Even though my work has much in common with that of a journalist, I am not seeing myself as digging up "dirt" about this movement.

Anthony B. Pinn<sup>9</sup> has also pointed out that a part of the tragedy experienced after Jonestown was that scholars and others are forgetting the humanity of those involved in the Temple. By doing this, he claims, they deny that these people were ordinary humans in search of meaning in their lives.

## **2.5 Translating meaning when relating to the NRM**

As stated by Eileen Barker<sup>10</sup>, those who wish to research into any New Religious Movement, will often be required to translate the meanings from inside the NRM to a language that can be understood by the "outside world", since such movements may develop their own internal wordings and philosophy that defy what we consider to be true and perhaps even contradict our own values. In this kind of science, we cannot use static instruments and machines to conduct tests and reach conclusions. We ourselves have to be that "instrument", and reach our conclusions, and in order to do that, we need to use our own perception and value system to analyze what we see and hear.

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<sup>9</sup> Pinn 2004; 24.

<sup>10</sup> Barker 2003; 14.

As a Christian, I have the advantage that I recognize much of what has been written about Reverend Jim Jones ministry and his teachings. I understand where he is “coming from”. On the other hand, it is a challenge to give a fair treatment to, or maybe to take seriously, a group that disregarded the Bible to the extent that they used it as toilet paper<sup>11</sup>. The fact that this group is on a collision course with my deep-felt beliefs on some areas do not represent a real threat to my work on the thesis as long as I am aware of it and do not let that get in the way of the analytical work that is being done. In other words: I do not exclude my personal observations, but instead try to make it clear what is my own opinion, and what is being stated in the books.

As stated before, I do not have the opportunity to induce an open debate among cult members via an interview, since I am not doing such interviews. Instead, I just have to rely on my findings in the written material and negotiate change in the area of NRM through debate. As stated in Popper 1973<sup>12</sup>: “*Our great instrument for progress is criticism.*”

However, my readings also uncover problems with regards to the testimonies made available to the public by witnesses who have been members of the congregation, which is that many of them may have been through processes of therapeutic considerations of their lives inside the Temple, and maybe to some degree been “altered” by therapists and psychologists so that we may not be able to reach them fully at the “level” they were at in that particular time. Not that it really represents a great hindrance in the case of Peoples Temple, since a) The tragic end result that could be witnessed in 1978, clearly showed the reason why some of the survivors may feel the need to distance themselves from that period, and b) People change, which is just natural considering the fact that three decades have passed since the Jonestown massacre. I had argued that it would have been an entirely different matter had the movement been around today, and we may have be dealing with accusations, made by the Peoples Temple, of kidnapping and deprogramming against what is known as the Anti Cult Movement (ACM). Very little is known about any anti-cult movement being involved in any such attempt to deprogram P.T. members in the years when Jim Jones and the Temple were active, and the written material that is at hand, does not indicate that representatives from the ACM or the US authorities were particularly interested in the Temple.

As with all things, this is something that should be duly processed and made part of the public debate instead of hiding it and suppressing<sup>13</sup> what may potentially be a good

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<sup>11</sup> Raven 2008; 418.

<sup>12</sup> Barker 2003; 11.

<sup>13</sup> Barker 2003; 11.

debate. The greatest instrument we will ever have for progress, is the freedom of speech and to be able to criticize every aspect of society and religion.

### 3 Jim Jones and the founding of the Temple

I will in this chapter try to cover some details and theories behind how the Peoples Temple (P.T.) was founded by Jim Jones, and in this enterprise, I feel that what needs to be addressed most, is the historical context in which the followers “resided” and made their ways through life. First of all, the time period in question, was a time where humanity in the western civilization saw a great deal of change, and the years where you were sure about what Church and/or belief-system you belonged to, were about to end. More and more the case would be that you had to go your own way, and make your own experiences, and upon reaching the 1960’s, many people had to journey out on their own “spiritual quests” in a time where the society as a whole was in turmoil. Harris and Waterman<sup>14</sup> writes about the 1960s that it was a moment in time “in which people struggle to understand their relationships to each other and to forces that are reshaping the world – a moment in which people imagine themselves in a global perspective.”

I will begin by presenting a timeline for the organization, go into the family background of Jim Jones, and then write about how he influenced the Temple, before I proceed to tell how his style of leadership was influenced by Father Divine and the Peace Mission Movement. In the end, I write about how Jones, despite his age and health, clinged to the leadership-role.

#### 3.1 *Timeline for the Peoples Temple*

I will dedicate this part to providing you with a timeline for the Peoples Temple.

- Timeline of the Peoples Temple

May 13, 1931: James Warren Jones is born near Lynn, Indiana. He is the only child of James T. Jones who was made an invalid due to being gassed during battle in World War 1, and Lynetta Jones, a waitress and factory worker.

1949: Jim graduates from High School and marries Marceline Baldwin.

1950: Jim enrolls in Indiana University, but leaves and becomes involved with a fundamentalist congregation, sometimes serving as a preacher.

1951: Jones enrolls in another University, which is run by the Disciples of Christ. He does not complete his education until 1961.

1953: Jones founds his own interdenominational Christian Assembly of God.

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<sup>14</sup> Harris and Waterman 1980; 103-122

1956- Peoples Temple founded in Indianapolis as an integrated church combining evangelical, enthusiastic religion and loosely socialist politics. Jim Jones, the founder and pastor of the church, performed healings which attracted many members. The congregation was predominately black.

1960- Jim Jones was appointed director of the Indianapolis human rights commission.

1961- The Peoples Temple Full Gospel Church, as it came to be called, became a part of the Disciples of Christ. Jones was ordained by that faith in 1964.

1965- Jones moved the Temple's headquarters to Ukiah, California, a city near San Francisco which he thought would be a safe haven in case of a nuclear war.

1967-1977

During the seventies, the Temple took on a more hierarchical form, where the Temple Staff was on top with the Planning Commission as the governing board, and they were situated above other departments, like the Diversion Committee which was responsible for mailing letters to the figures of authority in society around them.<sup>15</sup>

The Peoples Temple attracted more members and much favorable coverage in the press and from the political establishment as Jones himself and the Temple in general became more active in the community. Jones was even appointed to the San Francisco Housing Authority in 1977.

It was also during this time that some questions were raised by people outside of the group as to possible human rights violations within the group. The organization of concerned relatives was formed in response to reports of beatings and other punishments afflicted on members by Jones and the Temple's leaders.

Because of the increasing pressure from defectors, concerned relatives and last but not least, journalists, Jones decided to move his congregation to Guyana.<sup>16</sup>

1978- By the end of 1977, more than 900 Temple members were in residence at the commune in Guyana. At the end of the day, November 18, 1978, 914 members had committed suicide.<sup>17 18</sup>

### **3.2 James Warren Jones and his family background**

A lot of different things have been said about Jim Jones and the way he acted as a child. The problem with this, is not that the witnesses are unreliable, but that their opinions and memories are most likely formed post facto by the Jonestown tragedy. One of the childhood neighbors of Jim Jones, George Southworth, remembers Jones as a “mean little six-year-old kid – the Dennis the Menace of Lynn, Indiana.” They came to know him by that

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<sup>15</sup> Answers.com, “Peoples Temple: Information from Answers.com”; available from [http://www.answers.com/topic/peoples-temple#Organizational\\_structure](http://www.answers.com/topic/peoples-temple#Organizational_structure); Internet; accessed 11 May 2010

<sup>16</sup> Layton 1998; 114.

<sup>17</sup> Jonestown – “examining the Peoples Temple”; available from <http://www.owl.net.rice.edu/~reli291/Jonestown/Jonestown.html>; Internet; accessed 18 April 2010

<sup>18</sup> Krause 1978; 161.

term, since he, from the time he was six year old started to walk by their house and shout out obscenities<sup>19</sup>. And as another childhood friend, Chuck Wilmore, states: “From the time I was five years old, I thought Jimmy was a really weird kid. There was something not quite right. He was obsessed with religion, he was obsessed with death!”<sup>20</sup> He later tells us that a friend of his saw him kill a cat with a knife, and says that it is odd enough that he held funerals for the animals, if he was not going to kill them too. Focusing on this kind of testimonies, may not be too productive, but it does give an impression on how some of the people around him experienced him during his younger years.

As a kid, James Warren Jones did, of course get influenced by his parents when it comes to worldview and how to regard the idea of religion and a god as creator and sustainer of the world. His mother, Lynetta Jones, seems to have disliked the idea of organized religion, and is known to mockingly have called God the “Sky God”, even though she did believe in the presence and enchantment of spirits in our realm. She did have an interest in politics, and specially the issue of social class. The family of her husband looked down on her because of her own family’s class background that was one of the proletariat.

Lynetta took great interest in the Labor unions and the fight for the ever-exploited working class, something that Milmon F. Harrison<sup>21</sup> suggests stems from her experience of supporting a family during the Great Depression. Jim Jones did possibly have smaller arguments with his own father. This is indicated in one of the sermons he held, claiming that he himself was from a black family on his father’s side. According to his story, James T. Jones had been trying to hide the real family tree from him, and that after a thorough search, Jim had found the *original* family tree and, as he claimed during his speech, there was discovered a non-white in his family. That is said to be the last time he spoke with his father about family trees.

Jim Jones brought with him some of the qualities that his parents had, like the resentment towards the “Sky God” and also the sensitivity of the social class issue. This is very likely one of the reasons, along with the fascination regarding the oppression of non-white races in America, why he and his wife were the first white couple in Indianapolis to adopt a black child. And that was not without suffering oppression and discrimination, with him keeping to the idea of the “rainbow family” and the dream of a racially integrated society.

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<sup>19</sup> Krause 1978; 27.

<sup>20</sup> PBS documentary on Jonestown: “The life and death of Peoples Temple”  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7IxGGfpSWk&feature=Playlist&p=1DA3F17ED993027C&playnext\\_from=PL&index=5](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7IxGGfpSWk&feature=Playlist&p=1DA3F17ED993027C&playnext_from=PL&index=5) Internet; accessed 10 May 2010

<sup>21</sup> Harrison 2004; 123-138.

### **3.3 Jones and his impact on the Temple**

Jim Jones' interest for civil rights and racial equality was something that shaped the P.T., its work and rhetoric. This is shown by them being drawn towards the "Black Power" Movement, and it is suggested by Harris and Waterman<sup>22</sup> that it is a sign of genuine desire to locate themselves and their community in the midst of the global political and religious project of their time. Black as well as white members used the rhetoric of Black Power movements due to its greatly appealing talks about political and social change, and it probably had a lot to say for those who were looking to join their movement: They were searching for change and revival in a world that seemed to be out of control. Jim Jones gave them hope, and made them believe that change was possible, or at least it could give them the chance to work for the change that they wanted in their society. Not unlike the movement that campaigned for Barack Obama with the slogan "Yes We Can!" Even today, 31 years later, you are able to feel their enthusiasm, not necessarily because their problems are present in today's society to the same degree that it was then, but no matter what political direction you are drawn toward, the issue of civil rights, working to make a difference and having your voice heard, do have a timeless appeal to the masses.

After a while, Jim Jones became an obscure socialist thinker who blended almost uncritical elements from atheism, Christianity, Marxism, Leninism, Maoism and last but not least third world "revolutionary" rhetoric into quite an interesting mix of political sentiments. Looking from the perspective of today, it seems kind of odd that Jim Jones and his Temple could manage to have such a confused perspective and still be able to draw members, but the political left in itself was at that time very confused, and looked for a force or rhetoric that could unify them toward a common goal.

Many of those who joined the P.T. were disenchanted, and it would be quite accurate to say that for them God was dead, while others may not have had any experience in the realm of religion at all. What Jones did for them and many others, was to play the role as "Dad" or "Father" by providing them with help for their problems, and whatever issues they had, it almost certainly gave him the chance to feed their ego and, in short, give them something to believe in and focus their religious observance on. By the term "feeding their ego", I am pointing to the fact that he used time on them, gave them a moment where his energy was focused on them, thus giving them parts of his own wisdom, confidence and guidance.

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<sup>22</sup> Harris and Waterman 2004; 103-122.

### **3.3.1 Father divine as the inspiration for Jim Jones**

Very few have had more influence on Reverend Jones than a black religious leader called “Father Divine”, and Jim discovered this man when attending one of his services during the 1950s. Some of the things that impressed him, was how they were adored by their followers who gave them their absolute loyalty, and he realized that a large religious congregation could also function as a political power.<sup>23</sup> Jones liked the idea of serving as “Father” for his members, and due to the influence of the Father Divine-movement, he encouraged his members to follow Divine’s followers and call him “Father” and also refer to his wife as “Mother Jones.” From a Christian perspective, calling the leader of the congregation “Father” would seem quite natural, since you have established a tradition of calling this person “Pater” or “pastor”. Within the black religious tradition, the naming of the Pastor’s wife have also been tradition, especially if she is considered properly complementary to the role of the Pastor. However, black traditions also seem to give a deeper meaning to giving a religious leader the designation “Father” or “Daddy”. It means giving him absolute authority, and as a consequence, his followers will owe him absolute obedience. Looking from the perspective of Jim Jones as a leader that wants as much power as possible over his subjects, who would not be inspired by a tradition like that?

### **3.4 Jim Jones clinging to his leadership-role**

During the 1970s, despite the fact that Jim Jones was growing old, and succumbed into illness and drug abuse, he still kept a firm grip on the Temple. The leadership felt like it would be the best thing for him to let the younger generations take over and instead let him retire. But Mr. Jones did not share the same thoughts. As John Peer Nugent writes: “In a sense, it was pathetic; it was like watching the founder of a business being forced to retire but still trying to stay on top and compete with the new management.”<sup>24</sup> It appears that Jim’s mental health was starting to deteriorate, as he went spiritually bankrupt and his performances during sermons became more and more questionable. The leadership suggested he “dropped out of sight” and used the “disappeared guru” strategy which is that a movement where the leader have drawn himself into seclusion from the rest of the cult becomes more sought after. With the explanation that there is nothing like an absent god, they felt positive that this would work for Jones and the Temple too. He disagreed strongly about redrawing from public life in

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<sup>23</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya 2004; 39.

<sup>24</sup> Nugent 1979; 27.



order to serve the movement. For all that he cared, he WAS the movement, and without him sustaining it, it could just as well fall apart.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Nugent 1979; 28.

## 4 Members

According to Rebecca Moore<sup>26</sup>, approximately 71% of the members in the Temple were black, and black females had a near-majority with 49%. This shows us that African-Americans were a large part of the Temple, and I will get more into this in chapter 6.3: “Black Religion” which is a part my answer to the question if the Temple was really a Christian organization or denomination

### 4.1 Who Joined

I will give a little information on some of the member who joined the Peoples Temple. The list is based on information found in the books *The Strongest Poison*, *White Night* and *Seductive Poison*. It would be quite inconceivable to, within the parameters of this thesis, write a detailed list of everyone who joined the Temple, both the ones who joined but did not have any part in the mass-deaths and the members who followed their leader beyond the rim. However, I want to present a few of the former members in order to give a little insight into their lives and what may have made them gullible to be caught by the cult-leader’s snare.

**Richard D. Tropp**<sup>27</sup>: Born in Brooklyn, New York. Said to have been a “brilliant student and an outstanding teacher”. Early in his life, he indulged himself in studies of existentialist philosophy, drama, history of ideas and mysticism. Graduated and traveled abroad. He became lonely and depressed, and felt that whatever he had learned was “an exercise in futility”. After finishing Master’s degree, he was totally directionless and began experimenting with drugs and different movements and philosophies. In his autobiographical notes, he writes “I found no people around me who I could relate to – they were either in one world or another – I was in several.” He met Jim Jones in the spring of 1970 after first spending several years teaching on different institutions. Tropp felt that he had found what he was looking for in the Temple with Jim Jones as a spiritual teacher, a human being, a person who represented what he called the “Nietzschean “overman”” who built the bridge of transition between the human as an animal and the human as a human being, and sacrificed himself for the cause of humanity. Tropp felt he had found a place where he could serve, be and grow and save for himself a future in the event of the apocalypse that he feared and waited for. After joining the Temple, he recalled back on his former life as if he was in another world that was dying. He had found a new center of gravity, outside the realms of his studies and intellectual capacity, and outside himself. Richard Tropp died on the last White-Night in Jonestown after having confronted Jones, arguing that there was no reason for the members of P.T. to die, since they were, as far as he could tell, committed to life.

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<sup>26</sup> Moore 2004; 58.

<sup>27</sup> Lane 1980; 59-85.

**Virginia Taylor:** Born in 1886 in the state of Ohio, she grew up with parents that did not seem to love her. Her mother did not want her, and did barely allow her father to pick her up, which made her yearn much of the contact that children crave, especially from their parents. Being an African-American, she and her husband had to flee their city to avoid being killed or persecuted by racist neighbors. Disenchanted by Christianity and preachers who would not practice what they preached, she had given up on her faith. Having lost her husband many years ago, she one day heard from a friend about Jim Jones and how this man was different from all the other pastors that she had encountered. After a while, she was convinced to come to one of Jones' sermons. With the eyes of a skeptic, she scrutinized the man thoroughly, and finally came to the conclusion that he was a man of God. Later she moved to Jonestown, became friends with most of the people around her in the commune, and planned to spend the rest of her life where she had found safety from persecution and peace with God. She died during the White Night November 18, 1978, 92 years old.

**Elsie:** Born in Arkansas in the year 1918 as an illegitimate child, rejected by her mother, and not even knowing who her father was, she was adopted by her grandparents. She had a stepfather who abused her sexually from a very early age, and her mother seemed to have no love for her, since she was the only light-skinned child she had out of 3, and she would often get beaten for the smallest transgressions like letting the other kids cry.

She was impregnated by her stepfather at the age of 15, and was almost kicked out of her home because of this. She also developed a bad relationship to Christianity when her mother would send her away when getting visits from church-friends. After having been through a dysfunctional marriage, being rejected by her children and failed by the Christian community, she came in contact with the Peoples Temple and Jim Jones who talked about black liberation, provided for her, gave her medical aid, and most importantly gave her a hope to believe in. In her own words, she lifted herself from the cotton fields and ghettos to socialism, a principle to live by, and "a great leader whose idea will never die." Elsie was also one of the members of P.T. who lost their lives in the Jonestown massacre.

**Tom Grubbs:** Born in the State of Washington in the year 1941. Oldest out of seven children, he had a father who served in the Navy during world war 2 and after that spent a year in Alaska, so he did not know his father all too well as a young child. However, there was continuing hostility between his father and mother, and eventually they divorced. He grew up and went through school with a teacher who mocked him in front of his class after giving him problems to solve on the chalkboard that she knew he was unable to solve. He managed to make his way through school, but felt like the one thing he learned best of all,

was to hate. Having grown up with a mother who was strictly religious, he developed some level of disdain for religion, and got a huge inferiority complex. When Grubbs met Jim Jones, it became clear that this guy was not just one of the other religious “lunatics” who were out there, and he saw that Jim was wise beyond belief and knew how to talk to him in a way that did not make him embarrassed to look at himself. Jones helped him build up his self-image, and soon Grubbs was put into jobs teaching children with learning disabilities. He had everything he needed: money, but more important, personal fulfilment helping to give children a better start in life than he himself had gotten. But the most important factor for him, was the friendship, example, opportunities and trust that Jones provided. Without Jim, Grubbs claims, he would probably have committed suicide or ended in prison. He died in Jonestown along with his fellow members.

**Henry Mercer:** Born in the state of Georgia in 1885. He lost his father thirteen years old, and therefore had to face adulthood at an early age in going to work in order to help out his mother. As a black man, he did experience racism, and the most dramatic experience he had in this regard, was when he got kidnapped, gun to his head, by a person who said that he wished to “kill himself a nigger”. Luckily, the person changed his mind, but Mercer was inevitably scarred by this frightening experience. Seeing how the world was imperfect, unjust and in serious need of change, he decided to become a communist and fight for labour- and civil-rights. He did not fancy preachers very much, since he saw them as power-hungry men who most of all wanted to increase their own wealth rather than serving their congregation. He decided to give Jim Jones a chance, and liked what he saw and heard, especially his talks about socialism saving the world. He was killed at the age of 93 in Jonestown, Guyana.

**Pat Grunnet:** When she was born, there was an expectation that she would die at any time, and because of this, they did not even write her a birth certificate. She grew up as a lonely child, not able to talk much with people or her own relatives and family since there were many illnesses and tragedies among them. Grunnet quickly learned that she could not confide with or trust anyone but herself, did a lot of thinking and found comfort in simple literature like animal stories and people who was suffering, and in which she found consolation when she felt sorry for herself. Seeing that the world was unjust, she tried to make her way through different organizations like the Peace Corps, where she was teaching people in the third world to build their lives and country. Inspired by the revolutionary Left and their talks about changing the world, she took part in the fight for farm worker rights, war resistance, prison reforms and school politics. In need of an organization that was able and willing to put their money where their mouth lies, she found it natural to join the Peoples

Temple in the year 1972, when she sought their help in getting a fellow activist out of prison. Jim Jones said all the right things to her, and she also got the sense of community that she yearned for in other organizations. They accomplished exactly the things that Grunnet wanted to achieved, and she had finally found a place and family that she could call her own. Pat Grunnet was one of the many victims that lost their lives in the Jonestown tragedy.

**Mattie Gibson:** Was an African-American woman, 75 year old when she was killed during the White Night in November 1978. She wanted to break with her past that includes never getting any longer than third grade in primary school, going through a childhood without any proper food or clothing, and having to deal with brutal racism and beatings from white people.

**Sharon Amos:** Born in San Francisco in 1936, and died with her three children in Georgetown as a result of the message received from Jonestown that the White Night was happening for real at November 18, 1978. Amos, having a history as a Beatnik and a period of rebellion against middle-class values, she grew restless and lost her faith in the political left with nothing to belong to or make any commitment to, dropped out of College, and became involved in different alternative faiths that worked with things like group therapy and communal living. She got into trouble with US Authorities when she refused to cooperate in giving them information regarding activities by left-wing activists. Amos got married, had children and started a college degree that took her ten years to complete. Struggling with keeping her life stable while seeking a deeper foundation for her life, she met a sociologist interested in communes told her about an organization called “Peoples Temple” and called Jim Jones a prophet, and she then decided to visit one of their sermons. Sharon got interested in the Temple, resulting in a divorce from her husband who demanded her total obedience and did not get it due to her focus other places than on him. In 1967 she joined the Temple, and after a while she found her place within the Temple, and something to commit to.

**Forrest Ray Jones:** Born in Kentucky in the year 1931. A talented musician in the genre of country and western, he tried to make himself a career in travelling around the country, but he got depressed by the work and the lack of character by other people who worked in the business, and decided to take an ordinary job instead. He and his wife divorced after a while, and his life was falling apart both economically and personally. He met Agnes Jones, who was Jim and Marceline’s adopted daughter and married her. This led him into the Temple’s arms, where he, like so many others got impressed by Jim Jones and the fact that he had finally come to a place where people would actually care for him instead of using him just for their own benefit. He co-founded the Jonestown Express Band, and planned to live his life

within the commune of Jonestown where he learned to work with things like repairing appliances, farming and plumbing. Forrest had found a place where he could feel that he belonged and could contribute in making a better society, but paid the ultimate prize for finding paradise when he died in the Jonestown massacre.

**Ruthie:** Grew up in a sharecropping family in Mississippi, but ran away from her home at the age of twelve and worked as a dishwasher in a restaurant until she moved to Los Angeles and became a prostitute, drug-addict and fugitive after already having spent time in jail. While on the run from the Law, she one day encountered Jim Jones who advised her to surrender to the Authorities, and interceded with the court, having the judge reducing her jail-sentence considerably under the condition that she moved to Guyana. As Mark Lane points out, this proved later to be a death-sentence for her, since she too was killed in Jonestown. However, the life she got in Jonestown was much better than what she left behind as a slave to a pimp, and being tossed around in the sex-industry where she had a lot of strange experiences, like being asked to kidnap children to be sexually abused solely for the pleasure of perverts. She did refuse to do things like that. She experienced the Peoples Temple as an escape from a life that had been everything but easy. Especially as an African-American, she was thrilled to see a church and organization that cared about black persons, in contrast to the United States that did not even have her birth certificate. In Jonestown, she was free from fear of people attacking her, and was able to live her life. For her, Peoples Temple and Jonestown represented both freedom and direction in life.

**Deborah Layton**<sup>28</sup>: Also known as “Debbie Blakey” was born in 1953 in Utah. She joined the Peoples Temple during her years as a student, and as many other members, she became a part of the Temple in order to improve herself and the life she was living. Her brother, Larry Layton, had already been a member for a while when she decided to pay the Temple a visit to see what it was all about. After one of his sermons, where the subject had been “he cares for you”, Jim Jones approached her, and said that he had been speaking to her in his speech that day, and he said: “I have felt your embarrassment throughout the service. Who has done this to you?” Debbie did not understand what he was talking about, but he continued: “Your parents have never appreciated your immense warmth and sensitivity. Not once have they recognized or embraced your wonderful and loving spirit. I want you to stay. Join me and my family of all races.”<sup>29</sup> He then seemed to get some kind of revelation or information from the spiritual world, and suddenly knew that she was the sister of Larry, and

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<sup>28</sup> Layton 1998; 40.

<sup>29</sup> Layton 1998; 41.

he claimed that he had been “concentrating” on her coming to visit them soon. Debbie was quite reluctant to the idea of participating in the Temple, since her parents would probably not like it due to her being a student and therefore having other duties. Jones then went on telling her not to use them as an excuse, to avoid the nuclear holocaust that he claimed to have been informed about from the highest spiritual plane. As a young person with the pressure from her parents about getting herself an education and a decent life, which she felt she was failing in achieving, she was also gullible to fall into the cult-trap of the Temple, and got used to strange habits like reporting her “treasonous thoughts” against Jones and the Temple to Jim and the leadership. Telling members to report themselves and others this way, was of course an effective way to keep their subjects in check and total submission. She also experienced other divide-and-conquer tactics like seeing members accused of wrongdoings or immoralities in open services by Jones himself. Every member could at any time risk to be treated this way, and being mocked by the rest of the participants of the meeting.

Her mother, Lisa, got ill with lung-cancer, and did also join the Temple and moved to Jonestown. Debbie felt trapped by the P.T. cult, and decided to escape from Jonestown under the cover of having some work to do in Georgetown, the capital of Guyana. However, breaking free from the mind-set of the Temple, where police were out to get them, and US Authorities were out to get them, was not easy, and in a period after defecting, she needed to get deprogrammed of the coercive mind-control she received in the Temple, and especially in Jonestown. She cooperated with a growing movement of concerned relatives to Temple members in informing the public and the US Government about abuses that was occurring in Jonestown, and urged the US Government to inspect the commune and help those people out that wanted to leave. Her mother lost her life in Jonestown because of her cancer, and did not live to see the carnage. However, her brother Larry, after having tried to kill the defectors that went with Congressman Ryan, was arrested after the incident and became the only person to be put on trial in connection to the Jonestown massacre, and was just recently released from prison. Deborah Layton wrote a book about her relationship to the Temple and had it published 20 years later.

#### **4.1.2 Other members and the interpersonal relations in the Temple**

Some of the members became zealous, almost militant, in their attempts to serve the Temple and its cause, like Maria Katsaris, who responded to an enthusiastic outburst to something she had achieved, “Maria, you’re fantastic,”<sup>30</sup> with reporting this person for

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<sup>30</sup> Nugent 1979; 86.

making a homosexual pass. In Jonestown, she had little contact with other members, and did only leave her house at night, and only with Jones. Because of her eagerness to serve the Temple, and probably also her close relationship with Jim Jones; there were people who looked up to her, while others outright detested her for pretty much the same reasons.

An interesting question to ask is how the relations were, not only between Jones and his followers, but also between the followers themselves, because they were the ones who would do the work for Jim Jones and recruit new followers to the Temple by casual and personal invitations. On a personal level, there was apparently no big difference in how the members related to each others from how non-members would do their relations. However, the members were taught to write reports directly to Jones for every negative thought they had toward Jones and the Movement in order to keep themselves in check. As Deborah Layton writes: “I was in control when I reported my treasonous thoughts, playing the snitch in order to better myself. Over time, I became the perfect vessel for my leader’s dogma.”<sup>31</sup> They did not only report themselves, but were also strongly encouraged and expected to report any “treasonous” thoughts the other members might have confided in them. And being reported could result in harsh penalties for the person being subject to it. Leslie Wagner Wilson writes about an incident when she was being suspected by her own husband that she was planning on escaping Jonestown.<sup>32</sup> She really was planning on leaving the commune, but if her husband really did as instructed by Temple Leadership, and reported his mere suspicions about her escape, she would most likely have been stopped by Jones and the Security Forces. This shows us how not only how tight control Jim Jones held over his followers, but also how personal relations, even between spouses, were tampered by the Temple in the attempt to discourage dissent and ultimately defection.

#### **4.1.3 Everybody was to be treated equally**

Jim Jones did have sexual relationships with several of the temple members, both male and female<sup>33</sup>, and he took mistresses as he pleased, to great discomfort for his wife Marceline<sup>34</sup>. One of the mistresses was Carolyn Layton, who served Jim Jones both as his mistress and his personal nurse, administering to him the drugs he demanded. Did she have any special position with the other members of the Temple due to her close relationship to Jones? Certainly not, and one of the things that Jones was emphasizing all the time in the

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<sup>31</sup> Layton 1998; 53.

<sup>32</sup> Wagner-Wilson 2008; 8.

<sup>33</sup> Reiterman 2008; 176-177.

<sup>34</sup> Stephan Jones, “Like Father, Like Son”; available from <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/AboutJonestown/PersonalReflections/sjones1.htm>; Internet; accessed 11 May 2010.



Temple, was that nobody was considered above the other in the organization, and he demonstrated that several times during the catharsis sessions were he would lash out towards people allegedly demanding favours of him, either sexual or otherwise. Deborah Layton saw two such incidents. The first one was when one of her friends was openly accused by Jones for threatening to kill herself if he did not have sex with her. Jones put pressure on Deborah so that she would tell her how “sickened”<sup>35</sup> she was by her doing such a thing, and this way the friendship between them was seriously damaged. She later had the same trick pulled on herself, and it then occurred to her that they were up to some tactics of “divide and conquer”.

I have now written about some of the former members of the Peoples Temple, and we can see there were similarities in their reasons to join, namely the need for stability and safety in their life. Many of them had been abandoned by the society and authorities in the US, and Jones meant for them a new direction with regards to getting a direction for their lives, and also finding a place where people really cared for them, and did not just treat them like they were only “customers” or “business-partners” that was missing the value of being a human being having both physical and religious yearnings to deal with..

The members were communicating with each others in ways that would seem normal for an outsider, but on the inside, you would see heavy control techniques in use to stop members from taking positions that could challenge Temple authorities or encourage dissent among members, and nobody was safe from the attempts to discredit them even for alleged infractions that only Jim would claim the knowledge of.

## ***4.2 Society had failed them***

People had their reasons for joining the Temple, and even though there were different backgrounds, a common ground for many of them, was that they had been failed by the United States and the American society. For them, Jim Jones became a saviour in the sense that he took them out of unfavourable conditions and gave them a feeling of being loved and cared about. There were those who disliked Jones with regards to his personality and leadership style, but the vast majority did look up to him throughout their lives in the organization<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> Layton 1998; 77

<sup>36</sup> Lane 1980; 228.

People who joined the Temple, did it not necessarily do it out of despair over things they could not change<sup>37</sup>, but instead out of the hope that they could contribute to make a better world for themselves and those who would come into the world after them. They felt drawn to the organization that from the outside looked to be a caring family and a miniature civil rights movement. Peoples Temple did have the form of a religious movement, and Archie Smith Jr. does have a valid explanation for why there were so many that decided to follow Jones and commit their lives to him<sup>38</sup>. He points to a more or less secular doctrine saying that religion is regarded as an inadequate attempt to deal with the reality and subsequent demands that a person is being met with in and by a society. According to this theory, there is a feeling of immaturity and need of a surrogate parent or authority figure. He suggests that this is being proved by the fact that those who became members, were primarily oppressed people, and especially poor African-Americans, lonely, insecure and dependent persons who were willingly receiving Jim Jones and his doctrines and leadership, and also adapted their minds to the factor of Jones' constantly developing psychosis.

The Temple's plans of establishing a commune in Guyana however, was also welcomed by Guyanese authorities, since it meant establishing an outpost of American citizens in an area that could potentially become a conflict zone if their neighbour Venezuela sent forces to claim it as their own. Firstly, the people in Jonestown seemed likely to take up the fight with an invading army, and secondly, if such an invasion took place, the United States would probably be more likely to intervene in the war since US citizens were caught in the crossfire. And that would not be a bad thing for Guyana, who was a small country without a very big army to stop the invaders. Guyana was also a country which was more than willing to give refuge to blacks who arrived the country claiming political persecution<sup>39</sup> in their homeland. And that seems to have been partly due to demographic issues within Guyana.

#### **4.2.1 Returning to the United States was not an option**

Peoples Temple had a majority of African-Americans who at that time still had to deal with the aftermath of black slavery in the country and also an enormous poverty. To be able to live under a roof, with food served every day, and not having to fear that white racists would attack, harm or kill them, was to many a giant leap forward. For many of the black members, and do remember that most defectors before and during 18 November 1978 were white, leaving Jonestown was no alternative, since for them it would be going back to a life that

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<sup>37</sup> Sawyer 2004; 173.

<sup>38</sup> Smith 2004; 48.

<sup>39</sup> Nugent 1979; 155.

seemed worse than the beatings and mind-control that occurred in their community. Whatever conditions Jonestown Guyana had to offer them, they would rather spend the rest of their lives there, than going back to America, where many of them were so poor they would have to live on dog-food, since that was all their economy would allow them.<sup>40</sup>

They had no alternatives other than joining and remain in the Temple that did not have a very strong sense of democracy. According to Nugent, Jim Jones did not have anyone who could be considered his second in command, and the various committees that was set up to help administrating and running the Temple, were merely a façade to give the illusion of democratic influence, since every decision ultimately had to be authorized by Reverend Jones himself.<sup>41</sup> However, it is not that Jim Jones' actions did not create reactions from his followers. Among other things, his willingness to compromise nearly every doctrine that belonged to Christianity, and to use whatever means he thought necessary to draw new members, mixed with the brutalization of Temple rites and an increasingly bizarre behaviour by Jim Jones, made some members redraw from the Temple, and for some it ended in active opposition. An example of that is the creation of the "Human Freedom Center" that was to be dedicated to deprogramming the cult members and to help them assume responsibility for their own lives.<sup>42</sup>

Loyalty to the community became the primary value for every member, since each were to give up his or her own individuality and live for Jim Jones and the Temple. In particular the Jonestown commune did this serve as a prime directive, when the members got bonded together by the ideals and shared participation in the life of the community<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> Kenyatta 2004; 164.

<sup>41</sup> Nugent 1979; 18.

<sup>42</sup> Krause 1978; 34.

<sup>43</sup> Pinn 2004; 22.

## 5 P.T. in a politico-religious context

Peoples Temple, no matter if you feel it might have been an undercover socialistic endeavor, definitely falls under the category of “Religion”, but what IS religion? According to Dictionary.com, religion can be one of eight things, the first of them being

a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, esp. when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs.<sup>44</sup>

Anthony B. Pinn<sup>45</sup> explains religion as an experience, or category of experience defined by a quest for “MORE”, shaped by social context and contact that entails fighting against absurdity and devaluation. In a sense one of the things that happened to those who found the Peoples Temple and became members there, was that they for a moment in their life found meaning and something to live for. They found what can be considered a more authentic form of society, giving value and recognition to all persons, which could not be found within the realm of the United States of America. They wanted what could be called a more “complex subjectivity”, where every dimension of their human life was recognized, and not just the material sides. I think you can find a parallel to this problem in the debates that arises today where some argue that you can separate culture from religion, when in fact religion and culture can be said to be two sides of the same coin. Simply put: For those who joined the Temple, it was what they needed to feel whole. As Øyvind Dahl<sup>46</sup> writes, the word “culture” is built on the two Latin nouns “cultura”, which revolves around the cultivation of arable land, and “cultus” which stands for the worship of gods. Therefore the term “culture” has in itself elements from both the secular and religious aspects of human life.

There may be several reasons why people join a religion or in this case, a new-religious movement. For many of the P.T., however, the reason was that they needed to get away from a troublesome past with intolerable conditions for them to live. A search for personal rebirth or escape from an unacceptable identity with the intent of escaping and abandoning the old unappreciated self. In this process, they are giving up their old identity and taking that of the cult. What Jones as many other cult leaders intended, was that the “born again” members would give up their identity and have no goal or purpose beyond them

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<sup>44</sup> Dictionary.com. “Religion.” Available from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/religion>. Internet; accessed 20 April 2010.

<sup>45</sup> Pinn 2004; 1-27.

<sup>46</sup> Dahl 2004; 55.

joining the cult and serving the goal and purpose of the movement to the degree that the follower belonged to the Temple with his or her hide and hair. It seems quite obvious that this is a question of how strong ones identity and self-consciousness are. What makes one susceptible to be dragged into the realms of a cult like the Peoples Temple, can be dependent on your maturity, walk in life or even mental capacity. Christopher Edwards experienced something interesting in this respect during his years as a student when he, in search for comfort and meaning in his life came across a missionary for the Unification Church<sup>47</sup>. During the introductory week in their educational camp, he noticed that one of the other newcomers had disappeared. He inquired about where this person had gone, and was told that he was “too negative, so we decided to ask him to leave this morning”. In other words, that person asked too many critical questions, and so there was no hope that they could manage to recruit him to the movement. He was opted out before he could do any damage. After spending some more time in the movement, he learned one of the most important slogans for its members: “STOP ASKING QUESTIONS”!

Many NRMs are likely to succeed when their doctrines are non-empirical.<sup>48</sup> This means that, as in the case of the Reverend Jim Jones where he was relying heavily on the Christian doctrines and miracle healings. He did this while obscuring it to the degree that nobody could really try him and see if he really was a god or “anointed” by God to do miracles. Neither did he, for example, give any prophesies that could be tested to be right or wrong by his followers.

Lincoln and Mamiya claim that Americans as a whole remain “conceptually naïve about most religious behavior”<sup>49</sup>, since they show no awareness towards any other religions or denominations. While their tolerance for other faiths than their own is acceptable, their understanding of such movements is very low. I would suggest it is much like the situation we have in Norway with respect to such knowledge and understanding of cults or religions that may be considered foreign to us Norwegians: We do not know, and to some extent we do not care.<sup>50</sup> We know that while you walk in the streets, you may encounter a Mormon missionary, or if you travel to Oslo, you can go and get a stress-test from the local office of Church of Scientology, but this is to us nothing more than curiosities, and many of us remain ignorant about the faiths, cults and possible dangers that lurks out there. I guess ignorance to the

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<sup>47</sup> Edwards 1983; 166.

<sup>48</sup> Stark 2003; 262.

<sup>49</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya. 2004; 29.

<sup>50</sup> Statistisk Sentralbyrå, “SSP9801: -Norske verdier og holdninger 1982-1996: Sentrale verdier endrer seg sakte”; available from <http://www.ssb.no/samfunnspeilet/utg/9801/1.html>; Internet; accessed 11 May 2010

trappings of a cult was one of the tragedies occurring during the founding days of the Peoples Temple: People did not know about the possible dangers within organizations like the Peoples Temple that on the outside looks like respectable, even Christian, organizations, but on the inside it is full of leaders and doctrines that may threaten your sanity or even life.

### ***5.1 Peoples Temple as a Political Religion***

Most of all, the Peoples Temple was a “political religion” or at least a religion that took on a political form. Lincoln and Mamiya writes:

Political religion means that an institution or a person takes on the characteristics of the sacred in symbols, rituals, language, beliefs, etc. Expressions of nationalism or nationalist movements often take on religious form.<sup>51</sup>

They give three reasons to how the Temple fits into this category. First of all, they point out the secular activism that becomes visible when Jones encourages his members to fight for social justice, and his proclamation of apostolic socialism. In this sense, Jonestown was a fulfilment of Jones’ goal to achieve salvation in this world, where the community situated in the middle of an impenetrable jungle, safe from any danger posed by forces outside their group. The temple was, for white radicals like Debbie Blakey, an opportunity to help others while at the same time bring discipline and structure into their own lives that they deemed impossible outside of the religious community.

The second reason by Lincoln and Mamiya, is that naming it a political religion helps explaining contradictions in the Temple, like the fact that Congressman Ryan did not see any sign of religious commitment when he visited the Temple headquarters in Georgetown, Guyana, and that Jones used both religion, first and foremost Christianity, and politics to attract new followers.

Third, but not less important, is that it can be used to explain and demystify the ritual of mass-suicide in the sense that they were talking about a “revolutionary suicide”, as revolution those days was a term closely tied to the political movement of Socialism. Their suicides were not out of religious reasons but for the sake of socialism. In a sense, they were having a foot in both camps, religion and politics, and that in itself can be quite an explosive combination, judging from the wars that had been fought in Europe and other parts of our world as a result of people mixing religious zeal with worldly politics. The way the Temple

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<sup>51</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya 2004; 42.

was founded, it had been inspired by another movement created by a religious figure known as “Father Divine”, the International Peace Mission Movement who did also see political activism as a legitimate part of their religious work, even though not to the same degree as the Temple. Peoples Temple was so closely tied to the International Peace Mission Movement that when Father Divine died, there was a coup attempt by Temple members who, during a ceremony where Divine’s followers were supposed to give praise to Divine, instead attempted to direct the praise towards Jim Jones.<sup>52</sup> However, this coup attempt failed and Jones and his followers were no longer welcome by Mother Divine to participate in their meetings.

## **5.2 The responsibility of the Churches**

Did the churches, especially the African-American churches have any responsibility in the failure to stop people from getting involved in this ultimately destructive cult? The black pastor J. Alfred Smith writes in his essay that the 1970s were a “dark age for the Black Church in San Francisco”.<sup>53</sup> According to Smith, the churches at that time were mostly a form of social gathering places, and dinners and fun were the only activities that were put on the agenda. When the service at Sunday morning was finished, the pastors would usually just lock the building and go home or to whatever chores that waited for them that day. There was seldom time for gathering about spiritual issues or the things that occupied the hearts of many African-Americans in those years, namely the poverty and social injustice they were living with not just on Sunday, but every day of the week. For Smith, this is not just about the failure of the Black Church to meet the demands from the Afro-American society, but betrayal since their lack of action and willingness to help them facing real-life issues and the demands that met the Afro-Americans in American society.

The Church may have been quite interested in life after death, but before that, they may not have been as effective in talking about something that they all had to deal with before that: Life after birth! That is what Pastor Smith feels is the tragedy that went before the Jonestown-tragedy, at least in the case of the group that he is focusing on. To any church today, as well as in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, the challenge is to create not just a parish, but also a living community or family in which the members care about each others, and they are both willing and able to support the members in times of difficulties. Even though that is not what all churches are about today, that is something that made Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple prosper since they met the spiritual as well as physical needs of their members. It was not just

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<sup>52</sup> Reiterman 2008; 140.

<sup>53</sup> Smith 2004; 139.

a community gathered around a common cause, but also a family that provided them with both economical and material safety where they were strongly encouraged to live in social communes even before Jones decided that they should all move to Jonestown. In that sense, we really have no guarantee against the appearance of a new “Jim Jones”.

What I have been trying to do in this part, is to show that society as a whole, with regards to religion, family, community and the US Government, had played a role in pushing persons into the arms of the Temple. People came from broken families, poverty and hunger, churches and religious organizations that did not fulfil their expectations and needs for acceptance, love, direction, safety and purpose of life. I will get back to this later on in this thesis.

### **5.3 A millennium movement?**

Many searched for truth and justice in society or elsewhere<sup>54</sup>, something that triggered the growth of different beliefs mainly under the category of New Age, which is indeed a large category, covering most of the unconventional religious movements that have arised since the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>55</sup>

A part of the New Age, is also the millennium movement, and in the case of the Peoples Temple, we see that it belongs under this category due to “a situation of dissatisfaction with existing social relations and of yearnings for a happier life”<sup>56</sup> among its members. The millennium movement is in that regard, a new religious hope for a better tomorrow, and in the Temple, as it is in the New Age definition of a millennium movement, they include all of humanity in their visions, and not just the followers of the organization in which they are involved. Even though the Temple was primarily made out of African-Americans, everyone was invited to join them in their vision for a better world.

Clearly, many felt a great deal of pressure and tension in their lives, and thanks to the world becoming more and more relativistic, the men and women in the US and Europe sought the security of religion or at least some kind of religious belonging in their lives. As stated by Rodney and Stark<sup>57</sup>, this is one of the mechanisms that makes people get caught in the web of a New Religious Movement: When a person starts to see himself as a religious seeker, all the NRM really have to do is to put out the bait, and sooner or later you or another NRM (or a religious movement whatsoever) will catch him.

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<sup>54</sup> Wuthnow 2003; 92

<sup>55</sup> Hall 2003; 191

<sup>56</sup> Aadnanes 2003; 50

<sup>57</sup> Dawson 2006; 118.



It is a matter of finding your own identity, and the younger you are, the more prone you are to be caught by one of the New Religious Movements out there and uncritically accept a charismatic leader or a certain kind of philosophy. The incident in 2008, when Kaja Bordevich Ballo committed suicide<sup>58</sup> allegedly after taking a test with the Church of Scientology, even though we do not know for certain what really caused her suicide, shows us how vulnerable we can be. It is my own belief, and also a scientific truth that most of us go through the process of evaluating our values and beliefs at least once in our lives, but that you are more vulnerable the younger you are to come into the hands of a religious movement.

Reverend Hannibal Williams<sup>59</sup>, leader and founding member of the Western Addition Community Organization, pointed out in a speech that in a time when the community was broken up, when the relationships that bind people together was falling apart, the time was right for a person like Jim Jones to show up and take advantage of peoples credibility. When people were poor, hungry, in despair, and in search of a solution, the Reverend Jones came there and he got people to follow him. He had a charismatic personality that won the hearts and souls of people.

#### ***5.4 Models of cult innovation***

In this chapter, I will of course get into the models of Bainbridge, William Sims and Rodney Stark 2003, but then again I would also like to give a bit more information on Jim Jones and how he related to his Peoples Temple, that he seems to have regarded his creation and property. While it is indeed correct that Jones was the creator of Peoples Temple, after a while he became more and more unstable and in the way where the organization's prosperity and well-being is involved. That was the case especially in the Jonestown, Guyana Jungle Commune. Mark Lane, one of the Temple Lawyers, quotes a member, Donald Freed, who said that the problem with Jonestown was organized and worked fairly well and that in reality it did not need Jones anymore. Another member also said that Jonestown would have been a far better place without the presence of Jim Jones.<sup>60</sup> However, because his lawyer Charles Garry, advised against going back to the United States due to charges that really did not constitute any threat to Jim Jones, it became a kind of Jungle-exile for Jones. There was no existing legal threat to the Reverend, but his lawyers kept feeding his paranoia. That is not surprising, since Mark Lane was a typical conspiracy theorist that seemed willing to believe in

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<sup>58</sup> VG Nett. "Tok sitt eget liv etter test hos scientologer". Available from <http://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/artikkel.php?artid=505907>. Internet; accessed 20 April 2010.

<sup>59</sup> Hollis 2004; 82.

<sup>60</sup> Lane 1980; 87.

works happening behind closed doors that was hostile and dangerous to the American People, and that secret organizations were behind these kinds of conspiracies. The reason why I write about this, is that Mark Lane was involved in the investigation of the John F. Kennedy assassination in the sense that he applied to the commission of inquiry to represent the interests of the suspected killer, Lee Harvey Oswald, and that he wrote a book about the subject with the title *Rush to Judgment*, where he questions some of the commission's conclusions. He did also show himself as a conspiracy theorist when he claimed that one of the defectors, Tim Stoen, had been more or less living three lives functioning as a provocateur in Jonestown on behalf of the United States Government, encouraging "radical actions" prior to his defection from the Temple<sup>61</sup>. The Wikipedia article covering this subject, places Lane among other conspiracy theorists that did also raise critics regarding the tragedy and the Government's alleged role in the tragedy.

Jim Jones was a drug addict. According to Mark Lane, he was sustained by a number of different medications, and became addicted to drugs which tranquilized him, put him to sleep, or woke him up. In addition, he drank cognac in moderate amounts. Both he and Jonestown were deteriorating, and it is possible that a move back home for Jones would have provided the beginning of a solution for the man and the community. In other words, the mental and physical health was in a downwards spiral, and his stay in the commune did not do anything good neither to Jones or the Temple members.

His control with the commune and the Temple in itself was much like that of a king in the medieval times: As long as he was present, the control would be strong, and when the "king" left the United States for Jonestown, the attendance to Temple services and growth of membership would drop drastically now that there was no charismatic leader to lead newcomers into the folds of the organization. He was the one who started the whole organization, and nobody else were able to draw attention from outsiders or rally them for social action the same way that Jim Jones did it. The Temple resembled a kingdom in more than that respect: As another great paradox, Reverend Jones would lash out against the US legal system for locking up minorities and also the economic system that he held responsible for condemning people to poverty. Still, he would have lawyers and accountants that could work on managing the internal affairs and economy in the Temple.<sup>62</sup> Of course, since it was indeed an organization in need of people to handle those aspects of day to day business. As

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<sup>61</sup> Wikipedia. "Mark Lane (author)." Available from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark\\_Lane\\_\(author\)#After\\_the\\_tragedy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Lane_(author)#After_the_tragedy); accessed 27 April 2010.

<sup>62</sup> Smith 2004; 150.

with any other church or organized community of a certain size, it becomes necessary to hire people, either from the outside or inside of the organization to handle things like economy, legal issues, etc.

There is little doubt that James Warren Jones was good at talking to the masses and getting people to follow him<sup>63</sup>. John Peer Nugent quotes a report of the US Congress dealing with the Jonestown tragedy that describes Jones as “first and foremost, a master of mind control.” The Temple moving to Jonestown was a disaster for the organization, as it made him an absolute dictator, witnessed among other things by Deborah Layton’s struggle to escape the commune. His charismatic disposition made them follow him and take his psychological problems and make it part of their own psychology.

#### **5.4.1 Methods for isolation**

There are a lot of different methods for a cult leader to control his followers, and in our case the cult leader knew exactly what kinds of tools he should use in order to get people to stay within the organization. Lincoln and Mamiya<sup>64</sup> describes three types of isolation meant to protect the cult membership from “contamination” by doubters and others who are not of the same faith-system the cult itself professes: Communicative, Social and Physical isolation. By communicative isolation they refer to members being taught to dissimulate, be evasive, secretive or claim ignorance about cult activities. They will also in some instances use internal terminology that is only used and understood within the organization. “White Night” is a term that would be understood within the Temple, but very unlikely to be understood by outsiders. “White Night” meant that they were facing a crisis situation, and was used as some sort of reversed racism where black was “good” and white was “evil”.

Social isolation means that members are kept to themselves and get responsibilities that keep them as much as possible within the realm of the organization and its doctrines. Sermons, activities of fundraising etc. that keeps the members away from outsiders that may pollute their thoughts with critical questions and constitute a threat that they might defect. By physical isolation, they are talking about keeping members in dormitories, communes and settlements, which is quite effective if it is applied on members that do not need to leave for work, school, etc. These three methods are steps toward the ultimate goal of total isolation, which is seldom achieved by cults and cult leaders, but was successful for Jim Jones. By applying these elements of mind control and combining it with the total isolation in

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<sup>63</sup> Nugent 1979; 75.

<sup>64</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya 2004; 36-37.

Jonestown, he managed to encapsulate the members in a private cosmos where the concept of identity were determined by the individual and his or her peers in the cult, and more significantly by the superior wisdom and revelations of the leader.

Under such a controlling regime, it is easy for the cult leader to apply total control over his subjects, and in Jim Jones' case, he seems to have enjoyed this to the full extent.

### ***5.5 Jones impatient towards dissenting opinions***

Terri Buford, one of the Temple Members who moved to Jonestown, was informed by other members who were dissatisfied with the conditions they had to live under that they had written a petition to Jim Jones about what could be improved about the project. She did not give him any names, but told him in general that people were unhappy with having too little sleep at night, and that the food could use more variation than it had at that point. Jim Jones became enraged by this information, and he demanded to know who they were in order for him to give them a public punishment during the next meeting, and there were often such sermons in the Temple and the Commune. Wisely, she told him that there were no names to give, but that it was a general opinion among the inhabitants.<sup>65</sup> Surely, this indicates that Jim Jones did not tolerate that people openly disagreed with how he ran the commune.

Those who did not succumb to the leadership of Jim Jones and even openly opposed him or tried to defect, would risk harsh punishments, and in one case one of Jones' mistresses had become an embarrassment to Jones after he publicly broke up with her during a meeting, and in the end, she was put under heavy sedation in what was called "the intensive care unit" in Jonestown. Other abuses were the punishment of individuals who had entered into relationships without the permission of the "Relationships Committee" that was established in order to regulate who would be allowed to marry who. The punishment for this violation was to be forced to have public sex on a platform with persons they were known to dislike, and with the whole commune, members of all ages, invited to watch. They did also punish children who wet their beds with either giving them electric shock or make them wear soiled pants on their heads. Minor infractions could be punished by having them eat hot peppers.<sup>66</sup>

People would also receive corporal punishment, in at least one episode beaten bloody<sup>67</sup> by another church member, in front of the congregation, for questioning points of doctrine. Interesting enough, there was also reports about private planes would often land at the airstrip and pick up badly injured Americans. The official story told to the guards at the

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<sup>65</sup> Lane 1980; 89.

<sup>66</sup> Nugent 1979; 142-143.

<sup>67</sup> Krause 1978; 10.

airport and the police, was that they had been injured while working with machetes or machinery, but for many of the outsiders, it was quite suspicious that those alleged accidents would happen that often.<sup>68</sup>

As Lincoln and Mamiya put it “Because of his independent, superior insight, the leader is characteristically impatient with the contrary opinions of others. He is above criticism, which is at best no more than an illustration of the ignorance of his enemies and at worst a transparent strategy of the devils who oppose him.”<sup>69</sup> Jim wanted to be above criticism, and those who dared oppose him, would receive a quite uncomfortable response when doing so, especially if they did so under a meeting in the Jonestown commune. Nobody was spared, and even the elderly risked being punished for talking back at Jones. Deborah Layton writes about an incident<sup>70</sup> where her mother had made a marmalade drink for Jim Jones to enjoy during one of their communal meetings, and it ended in him accusing the well-doers, and especially her own mother for being extravagant since they used the resources from the commune to make such a beverage, a serious offense in a religious community based on socialistic ideas, and threatened to punish the people close to her if she ever deceived him.

That was regarded by Layton to be quite an unfitting punishment for that “crime”, and most people would probably agree that it is unethical and immoral to threaten one of the faithful followers for making him an innocent drink. And that is a phenomenon explained by Lincoln and Mamiya in that “all moral observances are transcended by the office of the leader. They simply do not apply. While he may choose to set certain examples of moral behavior for his followers, this is not to be construed as his own submission to (or need for) normative constraints.” In other words: His world, his rules!

### **5.5.1 The Illusion of Authority**

No mind-control technique is without weaknesses, and even in the Jonestown commune, the idea of total and absolute control over the cult members was unachievable no matter how much Jones and his inner circle leadership tried to discourage and avoid the development of dissenting opinions. The fact that some members approached Congressman Leo Ryan and his delegation to ask for help being escorted out of Jonestown, confirms just that. According to Mark Lane, there was a weak point in Jones’ physical control over the town: The guards, who were the only ones allowed to carry arms, was one of the biggest threats to his power. And the author suggests that they were contemplating a coup against Jim

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<sup>68</sup> Krause 1978; 39.

<sup>69</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya. 2004; 35.

<sup>70</sup> Layton 1998; 189.

Jones, but that it was postponed pending the outcome of the plans to move to the USSR. “During December 1978 either the move to the Soviet Union was to commence or Jones would face the possibility of a coup led by his security guards or a revolution with many residents participating.”<sup>71</sup>

It might be the case that Temple security forces, as the only group in the commune that was allowed to carry guns, were tempted to do something about the conditions they were forced to live under. Who knows what would have happened had Congressman Ryan not entered the Town with a cobbler of government officials, concerned relatives, some defectors and nosy journalists that stirred up the population? Considering that the community seemed to be falling apart along with Jones’ mental health, and that there had already been several rehearsals for the final “white night”, we would probably have seen the leadership overthrown or the mass death would have occurred on a later stage. Jonestown was only a tragedy waiting to happen.

## **5.6 Peoples Temple as a Cult**

To give the idea of why I call Peoples Temple a Cult, I will try to fit it into one of the models for how a cult is formed. As stated by Bainbridge and Stark<sup>72</sup>:

We define cults as social enterprises primarily engaged in the production and exchange of novel and exotic compensators. Thus not all cults are religions. Some cults offer magic, for example psychic healing of specific diseases, and do not offer such general compensators as eternal life.

I feel that Peoples Temple is easiest to identify according to what they call “The Psychopathology Model of Cult Innovation” which consists of eight ideas of how the cult functions.

- 1) PT can be seen as a novel cultural response to personal and societal crisis. An evidence for this, is Jones’s focus on integration and fight against social injustice and racism.
- 2) Even though there is no clear diagnosis that I know of right now, many of those who knew Jim Jones believe that he was in some sort of psychological distress that made him act quite irrational at times.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Lane 1980; 95.

<sup>72</sup> Lane 1980; 60.

<sup>73</sup> Reiterman 2008; 320.

3) Records from sermons showed that Jim Jones could act psychotic, even though we cannot always make the distinction between normal religious behavior and psychosis. Swartling had some experience with this when he was a member of the Word of Faith<sup>74</sup>. His feelings of getting closer to God would have the counter-reaction that he felt social anxiety when relating to his friends that was not within the movement. A psychiatrist in his book also talks about something called “reactive psychosis”, which is the definition of a temporary mental disease triggered by factors outside the person, like for instance mind-control techniques used in some religious movements. Reverend Jones was a visionary who could probably blame some of this on drug abuse and mental problems.

Point 4 and 5 does not fit entirely, but 6) he did direct his efforts toward people who had problems in their lives, both racial and otherwise.

7) It is clear that as much as he worked with reaching people in emotional turmoil and other problems, there is evidence that at least some of his followers had “unresolved” problems in their lives, even though there were also people there who had some formal education and a family that wanted contact. That being said, there is not necessarily a contradiction for a person to have this kind of problems and still have an education. However, education can give you stability in your life, and a job that gains you safety and protection in economic and social respects.

8) This is the last point in the model, and I think this is what resembles Jim Jones and his relation to his congregation the most, namely the “Cure”<sup>75</sup> for Jones’s mental illness by the fact that he got a relatively high number of followers, and that he saw the eventual defections as a threat to the Temple, but also to his very person.

The way I see this model fit for the PT, is that he as the founder created compensators to give to his followers in return for their adoration<sup>76</sup>.

William Sims Bainbridge and Rodney Stark writes about three compatible models of cult formation, and I have now mentioned the first of them and found it to be the most fitting with regards to Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple. The other two models are the Entrepreneur model and the Subculture-Evolution model.

The Entrepreneur model, which they point out has not received as much attention from social scientists as the Psychopathology model, pictures the cult founder as a person who “consciously develop new compensator-systems in order to exchange them for great

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<sup>74</sup> Swartling 1993; 28 and 104.

<sup>75</sup> Bainbridge and Stark 2003; 61.

<sup>76</sup> Bainbridge and Stark 2003; 69.

rewards.”<sup>77</sup> In other words, it regards the cult as some kind of business where the cult leader gives his followers a product, like self-development courses, promises of monetary gains or eternal salvation or the chance to make a better world, etc. There are similarities between the psychopathology model and the entrepreneur model in the fact that they both talk about an exchange between the “guru” and his followers, but the main difference between them, is that while the psychopathology model focuses on the more internal gain for the two parties, the entrepreneur model points to the outside materialistic exchange.

The last of the three models, the Subculture-Evolution, is different from the other two in the regard that it does not point to a single individual who would found the religious movement. In fact, what it suggests is that “cults can emerge without authoritative leaders, and [...] that even radical cultural developments can be achieved through many small steps.” What immediately comes to my mind with regards to this particular theory, is the Goth subculture<sup>78</sup> where people belonging to this movement does not necessarily seek the company of other like-minded people or for that matter have any organized leadership for their beliefs or preferences, but that there are certain basic ideas or just musical taste that binds them together. This model fits for the Goth movement in that it seems like a perfect way for youths and adults to ascertain their independence and to seek for themselves their own identity. Putting the people in a movement like this, could easily be described as the equivalent to herding cats.

I chose to put the Peoples Temple into the psychopathologic model since it fits with how the movement was influenced by Jones’ mental health, and that especially the Jonestown commune collectively seemed to take on the paranoia of Jones. The Entrepreneur model does not fit on Peoples Temple because of it lacking focus on the deep psychological bonds between Jones and his followers, and the sub-culture model is totally out of the question since Peoples Temple did not emerge without a leader, and Jim Jones was not the kind of man who would accept any such lose ends within the boundaries of his Temple. Not in the United States, and certainly not in Jonestown!

### **5.6.1 Jim Jones as the “provider” for his members**

It might be argued that Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple served as some sort of provider for especially black members of the commune, but the question is whether or not this support was just as much meant to hinder black people, that were the weakest and most

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<sup>77</sup> Bainbridge and Stark. 2003; 59-70.

<sup>78</sup> Wikipedia. “Goth Subculture,” Available from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goth\\_subculture](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goth_subculture). Internet; accessed 29 April 2010.



vulnerable members in the Temple besides the children. The temple also used money in order to pressure their members into staying within the Congregation, like the case with Jeanette Kerns<sup>79</sup> who was being treated badly by the other members of PT because she stood out among them by using jewelries and by other means showing her relative wealth. She was planning on leaving, but since the Temple provided the money for her education, Jones told her that this money would stop, and she would not be able to finish her studies. So the support by PT obviously went two ways.

His theology also included that the members would travel to a promised land that flowed with milk and honey,<sup>80</sup> which more and more emphasized the belief that they were the chosen people. This belief followed the Temple during its whole history from the beginning and till the end, and Jim Jones seems to have drawn it even further: Since they were the chosen people<sup>81</sup>, they would also suffer persecution from the “evil capitalists” in the US and Europe.

You cannot trick every single person in the congregation all the time, but as long as you have devoted followers, some will fall for the most blatant lies at most times. Jim Jones was with no doubt *the* leader of Peoples Temple, and the sermons and worships and whole existence of the Temple revolved around and through him, which became quite obvious when he moved to Jonestown and the visits to their services went down drastically. The leadership in the local Temples, were not able to sustain the membership growth they had during the formation when Jim Jones himself was having sermons and got people to join up on the movement as a political religion focused on humanitarian work for the black and the poor.

### **5.6.2 The Focus Directed at One Person**

PT centering on Reverend Jones is one clear indication that we are dealing with a cult since it “Exhibits great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea or thing,”<sup>82</sup> as stated by Michael Langone (1993). That being said, there is a difference between cults too, and not all are as destructive as Peoples Temple. Even though Jones granted himself some liberties with respect to sexuality, there were strict rules on who could marry one another, and those who wanted to go that way, had to submit this to a “Relationship Committee<sup>83</sup>” and get their approval. Jim Jones would also ask members to divorce if that suited him and the cause. Unlike the Oneida Community, they did not practice “free love” to that extent, since they

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<sup>79</sup> Reiterman 2008; 186.

<sup>80</sup> Hall 2003; 196.

<sup>81</sup> Reiterman 2008; 328.

<sup>82</sup> Dawson 2006; 28.

<sup>83</sup> Layton 1998; 155.

were much of a collective hive with Jim Jones as their “Emperor”<sup>84</sup>. Or as Jim Jones put it himself: “I can do anything I want because I’ve sacrificed to give everybody the good life”. With regards to the cult-question, Lincoln and Mamiya write that “the charismatic leader is typically a man of uncanny sensitivity. He has a near clairvoyant ability to sense out and give dramatic verbalizations to the most private yearnings of his followers, sometimes before even they themselves are fully conscious of what it is they want or need to enhance their lives with accomplishment or meaning.”<sup>85</sup> This description seems typical for Jim Jones, as he tried to make himself “Father” and provider for his members. It is the contact with the spirit world or claim on knowledge from beyond that separates the leader from his cult members. As an example of that, we can go to another religious community that came into existence around the same time Peoples Temple did, namely the Unification Church. One of the concepts of this organization is the idea of its founder, Sun Myung Moon, who claims to have been to the spiritual world and gained spiritual knowledge. Christopher Edwards, who was at one point a follower of Moon, describes a sermon where Moon, before his preach, starts fighting invisible demons that only he can “see”, claiming that the room is full of malevolent spiritual beings.<sup>86</sup> Even if Jones did not use the same rhetoric as Moon, he did show Temple members his alleged powers and contact with the supernatural, and that gave him power over the parish, and he became for them a cross between a god and a prophet. Understandably, it was difficult to talk against his teachings for any members with dissenting opinions, because, after all, who could win a discussion with Messiah, a living god?

### **5.6.3 Jim Jones as “Father”**

Jim Jones claimed his right to be regarded as “Father” in more than one way. Like a dad in flesh and blood, he would help the members with real-life issues and not just spiritual ones, and give them a shoulder to cry on when that was needed. He let them fill their own ego and to regard themselves as valuable human beings, and led persons who had become disenchanted by religion or did not have prior religious experiences into a seemingly religious community.<sup>87</sup> It is also known that a relatively large part of the Temple members residing in Jonestown were also in the kinship group of Jim Jones. Rebecca Moore, who lost family members in Jonestown have studied the demographics of Peoples Temple, and her estimate is that 5% of the total population could be put into this category, and as she points out, “this

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<sup>84</sup> Reiterman 2008; 343.

<sup>85</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya 2004; 33-34.

<sup>86</sup> Edwards 1983; 224.

<sup>87</sup> Nugent 1979; 25.

means that Jim Jones not only acted as the group's leader, but he was also intimately connected to a large number of residents."<sup>88</sup> His connection to the Temple, was therefore as strong as most of the other members, which shows that for him, the Peoples Temple was more than just plain business of buying and selling the needs his followers had.

Lane quotes the Soviet Newspaper Pravda who writes that "the available evidence shows that the victims were 'People in a condition of spiritual poverty in American society'" and that "they were striving for social, economic, and racial equality and justice."<sup>89</sup> Being a news service under the Soviet regime, it would of course be biased toward Soviet authorities and the ideology of Communism. However, Mark Lane agrees with the analysis that the inhabitants of Jonestown were working together to further the goal of a better and more just world, and he goes on quoting the black civil rights leader, Jesse Jackson, who puts the responsibility for the murders on the United States Government that rejected people who were old, black and poor, thus made them subjects to a search for affirmation and acceptance from "any source". And that was most likely the case, that many of the Peoples Temple members came there in order to feel they were regarded as fully human, which is something I will write more about in chapter four.

Individuals who came to the Temple and joined them, were in search of not only a place where they could work to make a difference, but also an organization or person powerful or brave enough to take the necessary steps. With regard to the Temple being a mainly African-American organization, the only black staff-member of Council of Churches in the end of the 1970s, stated that she believed the people needed a leader who was willing to take those risks, able to work within the system, and move a social agenda. This is something that she missed within the San Francisco churches, where the black pastors were mostly keeping to their own communities and did not take much interest in participating in the political system, and when Jim Jones showed up, it was the right man at the right time. She supported Jim Jones' active role in the civil rights debate since he and the Temple was doing what her own organization was currently only planning to do. This shows us just how far one person can get when he or she dares to take the initiative in a debate with a strong undercurrent of dissatisfied individuals.

"The cult promises to provide and indeed does provide for the convinced convert, the assurance and absolutism the large society so conspicuously lacks. [...] Once the initial decision is taken – to join – the rest comes ready-made: what is right, what is wrong, who

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<sup>88</sup> Moore 2004; 57-80.

<sup>89</sup> Lane 1980 318.

shall be saved and who not, how to eat, how to dress, how to live.”<sup>90</sup> Krause quotes a paper from the National Institute of Mental Health and the University of Maryland, and it supports my argument that the Peoples Temple was there to give people direction and meaning in their life. We are all in need of something to believe in and work towards, both in the realm of religion and in the empirical world.

For Peoples Temple members, the movement was offering them three things in the worldly sense: Sanctuary from ethnical discrimination, education and employment and lifelong economic security. If you come from a background where you have been persecuted due to your skin color, have had a hard time in finding a job with which to secure your financial needs for the long run, what the Temple would have to offer would be like a dream come true, when practically all your worries would be cast over the Church instead of you having to deal with this all by yourself.

In the spiritual sense, it would offer a sense of being part of a community and something that was way larger than oneself, and that is what the Temple, as any other religion was all about: meeting the needs of each individual. As Mary R. Sawyer<sup>91</sup> points out, people joined the Temple either to provide help for others who might not be as lucky as them in respect to material matters and health care, or they came because they were in need of help, being either a drug addict, a prostitute or starving due to poverty. One thing that was binding these two groups to the Temple, was their fascination with the humanitarian work that was done by within the church, and many of them had big hearts and grand ideals for how they wanted to be there for the whole community and provide the service that other churches, probably both the African Americans and the Caucasians failed to provide for the lost souls wandering the streets of America.

### ***5.7 Coercive persuasion***

But the road that Jim Jones led his people on was neither that of salvation, nor did it lead them or us towards a better future. He took his followers away from the places where any authority, US or Guyanese, would be able to reach them. He put them into hard labor and subjected them to physical pressure as well as mental stress when he had them work long hours, participating in public meetings that would last until past midnight, giving them four-five hours sleep at best, while his speeches were repeatedly broadcasted via the public speaker system. If strong enough, stress can make an individual susceptible to influences in his

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<sup>90</sup> Krause 1978; 118.

<sup>91</sup> Sawyer 2004; 167.

environment to which he was formerly immune, according to a hypothesis based on observations of acute combat stress during World War II.<sup>92</sup> It seems to be quite obvious that the kind of stress the cult members was put under, were enough to make them prone to accept any actions or teachings that Jim Jones would serve them. The rehearsals of White Nights serves as a perfect example of this, where they were told so many times they had taken the poison but minutes later informed that their drink was not poisoned at all, that they in the end did not care whether they would die from cyanide-poisoning or not. That brings us back to the psychopathology model by Bainbridge and Stark which tells us that new cults tend to be started or invented by individuals who suffers from mental illness<sup>93</sup>, and the acts of coercive persuasion would certainly make the members more receptive towards taking Jones' mental weaknesses and make them their own. In an environment where you are not allowed to speak freely, where all powers belongs to one undisputed leader, and harsh physical and mental penalties are given to those who do not consent, it would be easy to succumb to the thinking of the community and just go with the flow.

The PT was started by Jim Jones, in the beginning probably meant as a Christian Church, but witness testimony suggests that it soon went out of hand mainly because Jim Jones was fighting his "inner demons" with both the growing disbelief in God (that he mockingly started to call the "Sky god") and his urge to be in control of both his followers and his own life. One of his childhood friends, for instance, had to escape from Jones because he came after him with a gun<sup>94</sup>. That "victim" got away, but there was more to follow.

## ***5.8 Humanitarian and political engagements***

### **5.8.1 Humanitarian work**

For the Peoples Temple, religious commitment and political consciousness was almost two sides of the same coin. Harris and Waterman claims that "it is difficult, if not impossible, to consider the legacy and meaning of the Temple as a religious organization outside of its function as a political body."<sup>95</sup> I would say that for Jim Jones, the question was not about religion, but about using religion as an instrument for attracting new members. He would take religions in whatever form and compatibility with each others, and mix them together as he saw it fit into his sermons. However, for the rest of the membership, religion, in most cases Christianity for the African-American followers, they may well have had their own beliefs

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<sup>92</sup> Krause 1978; 120.

<sup>93</sup> Bainbridge and Stark 2003; 60.

<sup>94</sup> Reiterman 2008; 23.

<sup>95</sup> Harris and Waterman 2004; 121.

that they kept to even though Jones tried to devalue both the Bible and the Christian Faith. But no matter the real religion of the members, humanitarian work is one of those things that the Peoples Temple was known for, and that made them popular among many high-ranking politicians, among them the First Lady Rosalynn Carter<sup>96</sup> and the San Francisco mayor George Moscone who were fond of the campaigns Jones had for bettering the lives of poor people in the United States. He even had a communications team to write anonymous letters and calls to inform reporters about good works performed by the Temple and Jim Jones.<sup>97</sup>

What kind of areas did Peoples Temple focus on when it came to charitable work? It seems that their main issues were drug rehabilitation, medical care, child care, and also feeding the hungry.<sup>98</sup> That did, of course, earn them praise from the community and politicians alike. The housing of elderly and poor people, however, was not a great priority for them, and instead they gave priority to housing for their own members and closing them into their own insular world.

Especially African Americans were drawn to the Temple because of their work in the community, and they represented a cross-section of the black community. According to Mary R. Sawyer, there is no accurate data regarding religious orientation, but she writes that “many of them” came from black churches. However, the admiration of Jim Jones extended beyond Christian churches and American politicians: he even managed to get in contact with the Muslim community, and made himself known for getting members of an organization called “Nation of Islam” to start participating in the society instead of claiming racial and territorial exclusivity. Harriet Tropp is quoted for saying that “Muslims [...] admire no other leader outside their own ranks as much as this man.”<sup>99</sup>

### **5.8.2 “If you are hungry, you need to eat”**

Jones knew how to work the system and, just as important, how to deal with the media in getting people to know about exactly what good deeds were being done. For instance, in 1971, when the Temple moved in from Indianapolis to San Francisco, they early on sent good news around that they had started giving free medical check-ups to those who were in need of it but could not afford to get it through the ordinary but costly medical system. Another positive thing they did was to feed fourteen hundred people each and every day! A lot of these

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<sup>96</sup> Reiterman 2008; 305.

<sup>97</sup> Nugent 1979; 22.

<sup>98</sup> Hollis 2004; 97.

<sup>99</sup> Sawyer 2004; 183.

were elderly and all of them were black.<sup>100</sup> The Temple kept a high profile in the media, and especially among the African Americans, they managed to gain a great deal of respect. The Temple did a lot of good work, and this is probably one of the biggest reasons why it was so hard for the individuals who eventually decided to break out. Given the difficult situation for many of the blacks who joined, being poor, hungry and powerless within the structures that existed at that time, it is no wonder the campaigns to get them to join, were so successful.

J. Alfred Smith writes that the majority of Temple members were people who came to them because they were in need. “And I’ll be blunt about this. If you’re hungry, you need food. And Jones provided it. So they came, and they stayed.”<sup>101</sup> And he did probably hit the nail on the head with that statement. Any person that is in need of food and medical aid would go where these services can be obtained, and if they cannot find it via the ordinary channels, the natural thing would be to seek out organizations like the Peoples Temple. This is also something that validates the statement in Bainbridge and Starks psychopathologic model point one as a “novel cultural response to personal and societal crisis” but the entrepreneur model is also interesting since P.T. appears as a business where they “provide a product for their customers and receive payment in return.” The payment in this regard, is not pecuniary but emotionally since they offer the cult leader their adoration and eventual obedience in return.

### **5.8.3 Political Commitment**

Charity, in respect to helping poor African-Americans, was not the only concern for P.T. They did also organize marches for local initiatives, like demonstrating for an anti-suicide fence around the Golden Gate bridge, and also getting involved in the fight for freedom of speech where journalists from the Fresno Bee was put on trial for refusing to divulge their sources despite being ordered to do so by a court of law<sup>102</sup>. And that was, of course, something that again gave them publicity. Their political involvement reached far, and they did at one point even offer to provide a city supervisor Temple members as bodyguards when he had allegedly received threatening letters from an organization called “New World Liberation Front”.<sup>103</sup>

Because of the need for proper education for the movers and children in Jonestown, they established schools in the commune, and Mark Lane suggests that they might even have

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<sup>100</sup> Nugent 1979; 34.

<sup>101</sup> Smith 2004; 150.

<sup>102</sup> Krause 1978; 31.

<sup>103</sup> Nugent 1979; 38.

been better than their equivalents in the United States<sup>104</sup>, and that is also something used to support the claim that the United States had failed the blacks and the poor, both with regards to health-care and also education. So their social initiatives, plus fighting for imprisoned activists<sup>105</sup>, drug addicts and prostitutes, opened doors that would probably have been closed if society had been taking care of people instead of letting them be cast into hunger and poverty.

According to Tanya M. Hollis<sup>106</sup>, Peoples Temple was working at the edges of political space, thus making him some sort of an opponent of the existing governmental structures and at the same time working as a church. It is inevitable for any organization working the way Peoples Temple did to avoid getting in some sort of conflict with either government agencies or companies that did something that went against the Temple members and leadership's sense of justice, like for instance the case of some of a property owner who wanted to evict tenants from a hotel they were living in. The tenants were basically elderly Chinese and Filipino Americans who would have difficulties in finding other places to live if the owner, Four Seas Development Corporation, decided to evict them and use the property for other purposes more rewarding, in the economical sense, than still letting these people live there. The tenants formed a group called "International Hotel Tenants Association" and started their fight against an order that would cost them their homes. Jim Jones heard about this, and the Temple quickly got involved in demonstrations and meetings where Jones himself would take the lead in talking against what they regarded a social outrage. However, their struggles were in vain, and in the end, the inhabitants of the hotel were evicted and the building demolished.

#### **5.8.4 The paradox of their lack of power**

With everything that was going on around the Temple, and the work that was being done by Temple and its members to help out in the American community, it seems like a paradox that they were not able to achieve greater powers and positions in society. However, despite its initiatives, the Temple had a strong inwardly nature that made them shy away from making contact with the necessary government structures that would help them achieve such goals. It was this nature that made them turn more and more inwards and face the end that it did in Jonestown, in what Hollis calls an absolute denial of self-determination. Jim Jones did talk about global problems, but his solutions provided were within the micro-cosmos of the

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<sup>104</sup> Lane 1980; 35.

<sup>105</sup> Lane 1980; 58.

<sup>106</sup> Hollis 2004; 92.



Temple. This might be understood the way that political strategic goals were secondary to what seemed most important: To recruit new members. Despite that being the main goal for Jim Jones himself, they did have many humanitarian features to show the outside world, like a letter from the Temple to the American Civil Liberties Union where they claimed that “Our church is committed to the principle that the highest worship of God is service to our fellow man. The criterion for membership is simply willingness to work for others, not doctrine.”<sup>107</sup>

Jim Jones became known for the good works that he and his Temple did for the poor and starving. Like Father Divine, who would provide housing and food for a small amount of money, Jones would too feed the hungry in Temple soup kitchens while demanding his followers turned all of their money in to the Temple and in return get “stipends” for whatever purposes they needed it.

### **5.8.5 The reactions from contemporaries**

P.T. came as a response to failed community structures, and you could easily make the conclusion that churches, government agencies and local communities could have made a better job in taking care of its members. What does, for instance, pastors from the African American Christian communities think about what happened before and after the Jonestown massacre?

In his essay, “Reflections from a Black Pastor”, J. Alfred Smith writes that “In my judgment, there was an earlier tragedy – pieces of which I noticed and didn’t – prior to the migration of hundreds of Peoples Temple members from San Francisco to Guyana. I believe there were continuing tragedies in Jonestown itself leading up to 18 November 1978, even though I did not witness them.”<sup>108</sup> In his eyes, the black church played a central role in leading people from their own local churches into the arms of the Temple, and he feels that this role has been subjected to silencing in the years afterwards.

As an example of what went wrong, he points out that the people in his own local church was not able to understand the necessity of building houses for the elderly and host job fairs for the underemployed, or why they should start up programs for teaching African Americans and Latino American youth the art of science and mathematics. When he himself proposed such “radical” changes in how the church operates, he felt that he was being misunderstood, and some even thought he was too militant.

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<sup>107</sup> Sawyer 2004; 180.

<sup>108</sup> Smith 2004; 139.

But fighting for political justice is not an unbiblical thing. and the idea of social justice is not something that has been made up by the church of today. The Old Testament Prophet Amos (11:1) emphasized this message for his time: “Thus saith the LORD; For three transgressions of Edom, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof; because he did pursue his brother with the sword, and did cast off all pity, and his anger did tear perpetually, and he kept his wrath for ever.”

The quote from above talks about transgressions towards parties weaker than yourself, and it is easy to get the idea about a big government crushing its political opponents and a poor individual underfoot, which is also something that the Church needs to have an active role in fighting against. If we look upon media as being the fourth estate,<sup>109</sup> we could also regard the Church part of the fifth estate since it is responsible for keeping the minds and hearts of its followers healthy and preach against the influence they receive from worldly mindsets and injustice. But still most of the ordinary church members would not agree to go along with his so-called radical plans to make the church an outwardly directed organization which had a pastor who “pointed out the misdeeds in the land that he loved.”

Already before this pastor even met Jim Jones, other African American preachers asked him whether or not he was saved, or if he was a Communist. When he finally did get in touch with Jones, he felt like the man was sent by God, since he appeared as a godly man, and he was offering him both encouraging words and the money to get a book, with prayers about social justice that he had written, published since nobody would do the printing for him. And more importantly: he agreed with his ideas of a ministry reaching out to the African Americans, the poor and the elderly.

And for many of the members, Peoples Temple became an extended family that offered a communal fellowship and also a springboard in order to take part in social action, and at the same time being shelter from the dangers of the outside world.<sup>110</sup> For those who were in need of this kind of services, and for Smith, this came as good news. Neither the State, nor the society as a whole can be the “babysitters” for individuals who have made poor choices in their lives, like becoming addicted to drugs, become prostitutes or get involved in criminal enterprises. However, there is always the danger that such problems may become bigger and consume greater parts of its surrounding society, and therefore it becomes important to take those who are the weakest ones in our society into consideration.

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<sup>109</sup> Wikipedia, “Fourth Estate”; available from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fourth\\_Estate](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fourth_Estate); Internet; accessed 18 May 2010.

<sup>110</sup> Pinn 2004; 14.

## 6 Was Peoples Temple Christian?

*As I reflect on Jim Jones today, I am reminded of Matthew 7:15 in the New Testament: “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.” The issue is, was he a wolf all along, or did he change? What happened to change him? When did he become the wolf?<sup>111</sup>*

Father divine, an African-American spiritual leader, founded the so-called “International Peace Mission Movement”, which became an interracial and international religious movement. He proclaimed himself to be God, and did indulge in sexual activities with some of his female followers. He is said to have designed an organizational course book for cult leaders, and Jim Jones himself has allegedly been very inspired by the thoughts of this man<sup>112</sup>.

This might be where he got his inspiration when he held a speech claiming that he had slept with an ambassador’s wife who had offered him “a pile of money” in order to raise funds for the children in an orphanage in Rio de Janeiro. It is unclear if he really did go to bed with the wife of an ambassador, but he did teach his followers to use their bodies to promote a good cause.

### 6.1 Defining the term “Christian”

But how do I define “Christian”? I will try to make it simple by using a dictionary definition: “pertaining to, believing in, or belonging to the religion based on the teachings of Jesus Christ.”<sup>113</sup>

When going to religious services, Christian or otherwise, it is in order to obtain a goal, either on just the social plan or in order to get inner rewards like peace of mind or spiritual revelations. It becomes what Karl Marx describes as opiate for the masses, where you are not coming to church necessarily to seek community with God, but to “feel” like they are in some kind of spiritual or divine presence. J. Alfred Smith tells that he himself lost attendees since he refused to give them that emotional catharsis and insisted on preaching a more “social” gospel where he did not necessarily focus on them feeling the “presence” of God but instead taught them God’s feelings about the ongoing injustice that were being experienced and felt by fellow humans every day. Where the feelings of being close to God and being on the road He wanted them to be, was a quite subjective feeling, the sufferings of the poor and ill were

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<sup>111</sup> Smith 2004; 147.

<sup>112</sup> Nugent 1979; 15.

<sup>113</sup> Dictionary.com, “Christian”; available from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/Christian>; Internet; accessed 3 May 2010.

something they were able to see with their own eyes and touch with their own hands, and it was something they could do something about and show the love of God in a practical way.

To me, there seems to be some sort of a misconception of the definition of Peoples Temple as a Christian denomination, and this is an allegation specially, if not exclusively, used by individuals who want to discredit Christianity. In all fairness: I am not certain if all of these are people who disagree with the Christian message and only use the Jonestown massacre as an excuse, or if we are talking about purely innocents who have misunderstood what PT was due to Jim Jones being called “Reverend” or “Evangelical Preacher”. It is my argument that even though Jones may have started up as a Christian leading a Church, it is not what neither P.T. nor Jones was in the end.

Of course, you can use its charity-work as an argument, just like a man quoted by Mary R. Sawyer, who said after visiting one of the Temple sermons: “This is what church ought to be about: community and concern for social justice. Peoples Temple is a real church.”<sup>114</sup> And also some of the documents from Peoples Temple archives, like the statement from Timothy Stoen where he allowed Jones to take parental custody of his child. Among other things, the statement reads: “I undertake this task humbly with the steadfast hope that said child will become a devoted follower of Jesus Christ and be instrumental in bringing God’s kingdom here on earth, as has been his wonderful natural father.”<sup>115</sup>

Jones and the Temple constructed a quite interesting blend between the mainly atheistic socialism and religion in general. It is true that he did on many of his sermons quote the Bible, but that does not warrant calling him a Christian. If I was to put PT into any category, I had prefer using the model by J. Gordon Melton (1993)<sup>116</sup> who distinguishes between eight family groups where Peoples Temple are in my opinion placed in the category of “New and unclassifiable religious groups”. It is fair enough that PT was involved in charity and politics<sup>117</sup>, like many other religious or Christian congregations could be, but almost everything that was said by Jones, especially after he became the leader of the PT<sup>118</sup> contradicts such a claim<sup>119</sup>.

There was a call to social justice in the world that most of the regular churches at Jones’ time had abandoned, forgotten all about, or never cared about heeding at all. Where these churches had forgotten their calling, Jim Jones came and preached a gospel of social

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<sup>114</sup> Sawyer 2004; 168.

<sup>115</sup> Lane 1980; 244.

<sup>116</sup> Dawson 2003; 33.

<sup>117</sup> Chidester 2003; 165.

<sup>118</sup> Chidester 2003; 37.

<sup>119</sup> Chidester 2003; 51.

revolution and willingness to do something about inequity instead of merely talking about it, like most of the others did. Muhammed Isaiiah Kenyatta<sup>120</sup> claims that the Temple was no more or less legitimately Christian than many other local churches, and he goes against those who call it a renegade cult in order to wash the blood of the hands of Christianity. He warns about “nailing” Jim Jones to the cross of personality-cult, since that would also, according to him, require us to do the same thing to many other figures within Protestantism, such as Billy Graham, Martin Luther King Jr. or even the favorite local preacher that could also be considered a part of a personality-cult.

But I feel like he forgets the things Jones said and did while serving as a “shepherd” for some of God’s flocks. It is not uncommon to find charismatic Christian churches today, and they might be led astray by things like cults of personality and mind-control techniques just like Swartling experienced during his time as member of the Word of Faith<sup>121</sup>. One of the first things he discovered upon becoming seriously involved in the Word of Faith, was that his sense of reasoning diminished, and he would even be called traitor by his own pastor when voicing any doubt about his own belief. Things that we usually see as part of the occult, like levitation and healing with the help of spiritual forces outside the realm of the Christian God, would actually occur when he attended Christian services<sup>122</sup>. But still you can call that particular movement a part of the Christian faith as long as their focus would be on the Bible and Jesus Christ and not just a human being, ideology or cause.

However, the Peoples Temple was a different matter since it became not just a Christian movement, but a movement where the leader did, at least in the case of the elders, not care about their faith. In fact, it was no problem for Jim that they talked among themselves and shared their Christian faith and traditions, as long as they would continue to be committed workers and give according to their ability, like the socialist ideology demanded. Socialism has its roots in a secular ideology, and was at that time regarded almost a competitor to Christianity. However, atheism is not a trait that can be bound particularly to socialism or communism, and San Francisco, where the foundation of Peoples Temple was laid, was back then as it is today, considered the most secular of all United States cities. Archie Smith Jr., in discussing San Francisco<sup>123</sup> points to this paradox and explains it by saying that it must be understood as a product of our culture which is attempting to make religious longings and

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<sup>120</sup> Kenyatta 2004; 159.

<sup>121</sup> Wikipedia, “Word of Faith”; available from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Word\\_of\\_Faith](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Word_of_Faith); Internet; accessed 3 May 2010.

<sup>122</sup> Swartling 1993; 45.

<sup>123</sup> Smith 2004; 49.

impulses, which is a part of human nature, just a trivial part of humanity. Essentially what he is saying is that we do not need to invent religion: It comes by itself in one form or another when humans think and interact with each-others.

Émile Durkheim theorized<sup>124</sup> that when the members of a society participates in a religious rite, they are really worshipping society, and that it gives society power over its member not only through strength but also gives it a moral authority, thus making religion not only an important part of society, but also a presupposition for a being a society. And that also supports the argument of Archie Smith Jr. that religion is a natural occurrence in human communities.

## **6.2 The Uniqueness of African-American Majority in the Temple**

One thing that made Peoples Temple stand out from other organizations that would profess to be Christian, was their high percentage of African American members who would bring along with them a so-called relational vision which is said by Archie Smith Jr. to predate the social gospel movement. This vision made them willing to lend personal responsibility to issues of social justice even when the receiver of their help was not in their own congregation. In a sense, it was like the struggle we have in worldly politics in finding the right party to vote on, but most of them do have items on their program that we disagree with, and we have to choose the lesser of several “evils”. For African American Christians, the Peoples Temple was the equivalent to a dream-party come true, and it offered them a social-political program linked with a cause and an authoritative charismatic leader and a vision of a new social order that they could believe in and work towards achieving. They filled a vacuum that many do wonder if still exists today, 31 years after the Temple has been eradicated. As with all things that could on the outside be a very positive factor for society, P.T. attracted many regular attendees, at least when Jim Jones himself held the meetings and outreach activities, and it is estimated that between two or three thousand did participate on a regular basis.<sup>125</sup>

Even before he got his very own congregation, while he was a minister of the Disciples of Christ Jones would work hard convincing the members that he was the Messiah, and soon after he had gotten himself a great deal of followers, he started the habit of throwing a Bible on the floor and spit on it, complaining that people were following that book when they should instead follow him. However, this procedure was not repeated when he came to

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<sup>124</sup> Furseth and Repstad 2003; 48-49.

<sup>125</sup> Sawyer 2004; 168.

congregations where he could risk losing potential followers when they were offended by such a behavior. Members of the Jonestown commune would later point out that they did not believe in God.

Well orchestrated fake healings would be conducted on occasional meetings, and Mark Lane, who worked as one of the Temple's lawyers, claims that they used hospitals to help them put casts on people in order for them to appear wounded.<sup>126</sup>

He even blended his religion with ufo-cults and preached about his belief in "higher planes" on other planets, and that the whole congregation in reality had been sent to Earth from another planet and been born into human bodies<sup>127</sup>. It should be believed that his wife said the truth when she claimed in an interview that he was a Marxist who wanted to free people from religion, which is more reasonable when you hear him preach about "salvation through socialism".

John R. Hall<sup>128</sup> calls him a "living syncretist sponge", which is indeed my impression of this whole matter too. His respect for the Bible was nonexistent, and he used some sermons to trample on it, and in Jonestown, as mentioned, they used it as toilet paper. As stated, Jim Jones was not a Christian, but he did preach about reincarnation, acted as Shaman and often spewed hate towards external enemies, like defectors, the CIA and the FBI, which does not sound Christian at all, together with the eschatological teachings that the world would go under in a nuclear World War and they would be the only ones to survive.

Another thing that makes it hard to believe that P.T. was Christian, was the public beatings that became more recurring during the later years. It seems to have had a connection with the deteriorating mental health of Jim Jones, since he fell into drug-addiction and paranoia, suspecting everyone for almost everything. On mere rumors from Jones' many spies, members were subjected to humiliating beatings in front of their fellow members, and often they would put a microphone in front of them in order for everyone to see and hear that an example was being made, and that no one would be safe from this kind of punishment if they crossed Reverend Jones.<sup>129</sup> This kind of punishment and worse continued when they moved to Jonestown, and according to Charles A. Krause, Guyanese Police confirmed that one man had been seriously beaten prior to his successful escape from Jonestown. Another incident that makes me wonder about the Temples' Christianity is the assault on and threatening of a journalist who travelled to Guyana in May 1978 and asked to speak with Jim

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<sup>126</sup> Lane 1980; 46.

<sup>127</sup> Chidester 2003; 83.

<sup>128</sup> Hall 2003; 189.

<sup>129</sup> Nugent 1979; 41.

Jones alone, and then members of the commune alone. She did not get her wish granted, and was instead asked to leave the country, and after she got back, two men broke into her family home and “forced part of a bottle of whiskey down her throat. She was briefly hospitalized,” Krause writes<sup>130</sup>.

Glossolalia did occur in their sermons, and Jones was in control of how members would be allowed to manifest itself, along with other gifts of grace, in order to further his ministry of socialism<sup>131</sup> under the guise of legitimate Christianity.

John R. Hall is quoted in saying that Peoples Temple was an unconventional church and a façade to promote socialism while Mary Maaga leans towards defining it with regard to what particular group of members you are referring to, either the black working-class members who joined it originally, the white college students who joined later on or the African Americans, both youths and elders who came into the movement in the 1970s.<sup>132</sup> I tend to agree with both in the sense that Temple was used by Jim Jones to further the growth of socialism in the world, but the members would have very different beliefs in respect to Christianity, Atheism and other faiths. They may have been part of a movement that had socialism as its foundation, and the furthering of socialistic ideologies, but their personal beliefs may have been something totally different from what Jim Jones preached. They were there for the social works. The belief-system of the Temple had lower priority. Jones was very one-sided with regards to communist countries and the communist attempt of hegemony while he would be quick to blame the US and CIA if there were ever a struggle against a Soviet-supported regime, no matter what evidence to the contrary ever existed.<sup>133</sup>

Jim Jones choosing to settle his community in Guyana was not a coincidence, and the plan was to have the commune participating in the Guyanese socialistic project. Other alternatives that they evaluated for settlements, was Cuba, Soviet-Union and North-Korea. Guyana was chosen probably due to their proximity and close travel distance to the US and the people there were speaking English, besides, Guyana itself had a vested interest in having Jonestown in that particular area since it was a matter of dispute between them and Venezuela, and the Venezuelans would probably think twice about invading an area populated by persons that were mainly United States citizens.

The Temple had a white leader, but the majority of members were black, especially since it was closely connected to the Peace Mission Movement. Rebecca Moore claims that

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<sup>130</sup> Krause 1978; 76.

<sup>131</sup> Harrison 2004; 132-134.

<sup>132</sup> Sawyer 2004; 169.

<sup>133</sup> Harris and Waterman 2004; 117.



their connection to the Peace Mission Movement that was mainly a black organization made for African Americans, together with the fact that a majority of its members were African Americans, made the organization both culturally and racially African American<sup>134</sup> which is why I will use chapter 6.3 to cover the aspect of Peoples Temple as a “Black Religion.”

Due to their antiracial sentiments, the concepts of black and white were totally changed. They no longer talked about dark as something negative, but instead “white” took over the role of being something negative. That is why they, during times where they considered it to be a clear and imminent danger, called for a “White Night”.

To the point: Peoples Temple was, according to Jim Jones himself, based on socialism, and all the talk in terms of religion was only an instrument in saving people from the false religions and the “sky god”. P.T. was a “World rejecting”<sup>135</sup> religion with the wish to live in peace and be left alone, and even though the visitors who came to inspect the village and take with the defectors did give much credit for building such a community in the middle of the jungle, it wasn’t enough to stop the cult from self-destruct.

“Through it all I held on to Jesus”,<sup>136</sup> a former member of Peoples Temple is quoted saying, and it is a fact that after the Temple had been dissolved, many survivors went back to their old, conventional, Protestant Churches. J. Alfred Smith writes that he is “hesitant” to call Peoples Temple a Christian church since it did have many similarities to a church, “but it fell away from any kind of religious message. And because everything in the Temple was invested in one man, it could not – and did not – survive his death.”<sup>137</sup> Kenyatta claimed that the cult of personality was not something that could be used against Peoples Temple, since that would also exclude persons like Billy Graham from being called “Christian”. The fact of the matter is that we humans can be very gullible in regards to religion and following leaders, especially the ones with charisma and an outward appearance of legitimacy. This mechanism is also something that works within Christianity, and it is true that this is not something that prevents the Message to be preached to the flock. However, the focus on personality became more extreme in the Peoples Temple than what is usually the case in Christian churches, and the reason why I feel the Peoples Temple can not be called “Christian” is that they focused on Jim Jones both as a messenger and the very person who sent the message. They listened to Jim Jones, and not to Jesus. The Temple leader himself could not be called “Christian”, but some of the members had a deep-felt belief in the Bible, that Jim Jones would in some

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<sup>134</sup> Moore 2003; 58.

<sup>135</sup> Wallis 2003; 37.

<sup>136</sup> Sawyer 2003; 177.

<sup>137</sup> Smith 2003; 153.

speeches throw down on the floor and trample on, and in Jesus, that Jones would mockingly refer to as the “sky-god” just as he learned from his mother as a kid.

So my answer will be that PT is not to be considered a Christian denomination, but clearly a New Religious Movement outside Christianity, a subculture<sup>138</sup>, even though some of the followers may have been Christians.

### **6.3 Black Religion**

According to Mark Lane<sup>139</sup> approximately eighty percent of the members who resided in Jonestown were African Americans, which gives us a good reason to interpret the Temple in itself a black community, religious or otherwise. The Black Church in America was shocked by the news from Jonestown, Guyana, that the commune with approximately 913 persons, most of them black, had been killed in what the Temple itself characterized as a “revolutionary suicide”, even though many African Americans did regard the Temple and similar cults within the black community a form of liberation from the white community, since they were allowed to “be themselves.”<sup>140</sup>

Jones is said<sup>141</sup> to have used the same type of rhetoric as the Black Panthers, an African American militant party.<sup>142</sup> They were focusing on a violent revolution they believed would liberate black peoples from the poverty and suppression they felt the white people subjected them to. For Jim Jones, the Black Panther revolutionary theories, directed towards the whole world, was used within the Temple and converted to fit his own principle of “revolutionary suicide.”

#### **6.3.1 Call and Response**

But what I am trying to tell in this part, is how the Temple could be seen as a form of “black religion”, and in order to do that, we should establish what separates African American worship from the ordinary western form that we are fairly used to in our part of the world. Upon entering a congregation of African Americans, especially a Pentecostal one, you might notice how the relationship between preacher and the persons who listens to him is much more dependent of how they react to the preachers’ words and how he raises and lowers his voice. For those of us, like myself, who are most used to the controlled forms of worship we find in The Church of Norway and similar organizations, it may look like their services have

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<sup>138</sup> Bainbridge and Stark 2003; 67.

<sup>139</sup> Lane 1980; 85.

<sup>140</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya 2004; 30.

<sup>141</sup> Harris and Waterman 2004; 105.

<sup>142</sup> The Free Dictionary, “Definition of Black Panthers”; available from <http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Black+Panthers>; Internet; accessed 3 May 2010

gone out of control, but much like playing an instrument, the preacher will have to learn when and where to put in what seems to be spontaneous vocal interjections, an art called “Call and response.” This form of worship will carry with it a high level of emotionalism, and it was something that formed the power relations between Jim Jones and his followers during services. Jim Jones quickly learned how to play this “instrument” and use it to guide his followers through the sermon. He treated it like it was a black church, and he was supported by the traditions that the black members brought with them into the Temple. Rebecca Moore quotes Arthur Huff Fauset, who did a survey on black cults during the 1930s, who claims that African American cults that focus on political problems, tend to diminish the meaning of the Bible as a relevant source for their teachings and actions.<sup>143</sup>

### **6.3.2 African Traditions within the Temple**

Jones’ view of African American traditions as important for his way of relating to the Temple, was also proved by him taking on the black tradition of extended and fictive kinship. He would encourage the members to call him “Father” or “Dad”, and even address his wife, Marceline, as “Mother”. This is something that stems from his deep inspiration in “Father Divine” and his movement. Jones’ involvement with blacks and black worship went so far that he severed ties with a Methodist movement in Indianapolis since they discriminated based on race.<sup>144</sup> His sermons had a lot of politically loaded comments, and he attracted people that originated from other churches but joined the Temple since he by doing this, separated himself from other pastors who did mostly speak about abstract spiritual things instead. At first, Jim Jones became good friends with the black pastors in the community, but as it became apparent that they were losing followers to the Temple, they became more unfriendly towards him. That African Americans found the Temple appealing, however, is not surprising, since, according to Harrison<sup>145</sup>, “the spiritual realm of experience is not separate but inextricably connected to the material conditions of life.” In other words, spiritual well-being is just as important in black worship traditions as the material wealth that could be attained in this world. Those two dimensions are tightly connected to each others.

Especially the black poor were susceptible to Jim Jones and his teaching due to the vulnerable situation they were in, where they had no other place to go than the Temple. They and the others who joined and took part in the Black Pentecostal inspired sermons, were also

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<sup>143</sup> Moore 2004; 76.

<sup>144</sup> Harrison 2004; 123-138.

<sup>145</sup> Harrison 2004; 127.

vulnerable to the concept of “Audience Corruption”<sup>146</sup> which Archie Smith Jr. refers to as the process where, during the “call and response” sessions the leader teaches his followers to answer him the way he wants them to. Under normal circumstances, the member of a congregation like that has got a central role in the sermon, and the preacher is dependent on their responses in order for the sermon to be successful.<sup>147</sup> However, in order for this to work, the audience needs to have the possibility of critical reflection, and especially after moving to Jonestown, it got rather difficult for members to maintain their freedom of thought and speech<sup>148</sup> since the environment got more controlling, and they would risk harsh punishment if they dissented from how Jim Jones and the crowd was thinking and acting.

Anthony B. Pinn<sup>149</sup> notes that for many, when a person is black, he is also connected to a Black Church, if only sympathizing with one. He believes this to be a misconception, and that it needs to be corrected since the fact is that African religion contains a wide variety of manifestations, and that the black religious expressions in the Temple was not necessarily only of Christian origin, but could as well come from the African concept of religious worship.

On November 18, 1978, the day the assassination of Congressman Leo Ryan and attack on his fellow travelers on the Port Kaituma airstrip and the subsequent massacre in Jonestown, Jim Jones remarked during the “White Night” that most of the people who had defected from P.T. and Jonestown were white.<sup>150</sup> Could it be that the black form of religious worship combined with political activism was more or less alien to white members, and that some of them eventually felt so alienated by the cult, that they decided to opt-out? Charles A. Krause quotes one of the high ranking members of the Temple, Richard Tropp, saying that “social change is really our focus. We don’t see that religion and politics are separate. We feel that a lot of the opposition to us has been whipped up by conservative elements.”<sup>151</sup> Tropp was a member of the Planning Commission, which constituted the highest authority in the Temple after Jones, and he was also white. What he pointed out, was the exact reason why many joined the organization: They were there to “make a difference” and participate in a program which tried to revolutionize the world and how people perceived each others, blacks and whites, rich and poor.

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<sup>146</sup> Smith 2004; 48.

<sup>147</sup> Smith 2004; 143.

<sup>148</sup> Moore 2004; 76.

<sup>149</sup> Pinn 2004; 12.

<sup>150</sup> Nugent 1979; 210.

<sup>151</sup> Krause 1978; 69.

### 6.3.3 Weak-minded?

Were the persons who were drawn to the Temple “weak-minded and dependent without clear vision for the future”<sup>152</sup>, as some would suggest? Many of those who joined, were in fact vulnerable to the influence of Jones and the cult, like the poor, elderly African Americans who came there in need of basic human services like food, medical treatment and shelter. The young idealists, like Deborah Layton, were inexperienced in the world, and in many cases they would be easy to talk into following and obeying the commands of a cult-leader who was not only charismatic, but also in tune with the social riots that was going on at that particular time. A charismatic preacher who fought for socialism, could it possibly be more tempting for a young person with sympathies towards the struggling working class to join such a cult?

J. Alfred Smith writes: “If my African American Pastor peers had met the needs of the people, instead of just preaching about them, Jim Jones would not have flourished in San Francisco.”<sup>153</sup> The Christian church was present among the black temple members, but the Temple itself was moving away from Christianity, and that it all depended on the social initiatives taken by P.T. It was a black community since, despite Jones “Planning Commission” having a majority of white members, the rest of the Temple was mainly African Americans, and many departments had African Americans as leaders. This is something that made the Temple stand out between others cults, like Children of God, International Society for Krishna Consciousness and the Unification Church, who consisted mainly of Caucasians.

Jim Jones had different faces depending on what segment of potential followers he was addressing. For Christians, he would appear Christian, and for seekers, he would appear as the answer indicated. As J. Alfred Smith writes, he would use the same form wherever he preached, since the Black Pentecostal style of preaching was so powerful and emotionally attractive. The content of his preaching, however, was not always as consistent. But since people started going to his sermons out of the need to fill their emotional reservoirs, they soon enough stopped listening to what he said, but were instead interested in the way he preached it.<sup>154</sup> From this perspective, I would conclude that the Peoples Temple was formed after the model of Black Religion, and many elements from African American traditions, like the Pentecostal sermons and the idea of calling the leader “Father”, was taken from the realm of black religious expressions.

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<sup>152</sup> Pinn 2004; 8.

<sup>153</sup> Smith 2004; 151.

<sup>154</sup> Smith 2004; 147.

Calling it Christian, however, is not an easy task, since the members were not one single homogenous group, and their individual beliefs could differ greatly from that of Jim Jones and the Temple staff.

## 7 Why did they commit suicide?

As I mentioned earlier, the Temple was in part based on “Father Divine” and the Peace Mission Movement, and what is interesting about that, is that Sara Harris, who did a research on the PMM, did predict a mass-suicide upon the death of Divine. That prediction did not come true, but, as Lincoln and Mamiya write “the prediction by a careful student of the movement that such a catastrophe could take place attests to the power of the cult leader.”<sup>155</sup>

Following the tragic events of November 18, 1978, where the whole commune of Jonestown was massacred and an American Congressman assassinated, there was a great focus on trying to place the blame where it belonged. Among others, the media was put under scrutiny and critics for failing to scrutinize the Temple and warn about human rights violations, and Mark Lane points out that Charles A. Krause in the Washington Post was eager to fix blame by exploring post massacre evaluations of various newspapers around the world, but failed to inform that the Washington Post itself “had nothing but praise for Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple long prior to the tragedy”.<sup>156</sup> What seems to be the case, however, was probably that most of the newspapers along with the governmental agencies was out to place blame every other place than on themselves.

### 7.1 Under siege

Jim Jones was determined to give the impression that they were under siege, and for him the ultimate way of stopping attackers from destroying what they had built. He is believed to have suffered from some sort of mental instability. His cure for this disease was his followers, and when the Congressman came and took away some of his members, it was considered a challenge to his authority and an attack on the Temple’s impermeable borders.

The Temple had suffered from social encapsulation, and was now suffering the result of this and now imploded. No doubt Jim Jones wanted this to happen when he ordered the attack and murdering of the Congressman. Jones knew he had given the people unreasonable hope, and knowing himself that he was a fraud<sup>157</sup>, his only option was (in his mind) to step over, or take revolutionary suicide. The people themselves had undergone an abnegation of their own individuality and felt that they and Jim Jones were ONE, something that also is evidenced by the would-be assassin Larry Layton claiming that when he attacked the defectors, he was not able to distinguish his own personal identity from that of Jim Jones.

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<sup>155</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya 2004; 41.

<sup>156</sup> Lane 1980; 49.

<sup>157</sup> Reiterman 2008; 214.

Interestingly enough, the Temple had on an earlier stage proclaimed that they would not take part in any violence, but seemingly their threshold for violence has been very low<sup>158</sup>. This all probably stems from the fact that the madness of Jim Jones had been encapsulated into the very soul of the Temple, and where he would snap, the Temple would snap! And if we are to look at this from a psychological point of view, the P.T. was now almost considered one person that did not see any other way out of his problems than to take his own life.

One interesting point was made by one of the survivors; when they were going to identify the bodies, he noticed that Jim Jones' body had somewhat betrayed him in death. He seemingly had become what he and his Temple had fought against all these years, and said: "He was white. To me, he looked about the whitest thing I ever saw."<sup>159</sup> Of course, such a perception was not unnatural considering the extreme situation they were currently in. I believe that even though they believed themselves to be socialists, most of the survivors were now unable to identify themselves with the madman who was considered to be the one mainly responsible for this unbelievable carnage that had happened right before their eyes. Jim Jones could by many be seen as the head and very personification of the Peoples Temple, and when he took them with him beyond the grave, he also killed the ability among the individuals to believe in and identify with the Temple.

## ***7.2 Defectors and concerned relatives***

As with every religious movement, there were defectors from the Temple who left for reasons that might have varied from individual to individual. Terri Buford was one of the defectors, and I would assume that she represents some of the thoughts that were wandering among the "dissenters" of the Temple.

She was asked by Mark Lane to draft a statement of why she left the organization, and why she did stay for the time that she did. In her reasons for wanting to leave, she wrote that she disliked Jim Jones since she believed he was "at best a sick tyrant", she did not trust any more that he believed in socialism (the reason she had for joining the Temple in the first place), and that she could not follow his instructions anymore, since they went against her consciousness. However, her reasons for staying in Jonestown for as long as she did, were that she believed the majority of the population was a "principled, hard-working and

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<sup>158</sup> Dawson 2006; 145.

<sup>159</sup> Chidester 2003; 161.



sacrificing [...] people who had given up everything to build a community.” All her friends were there, and that she liked living out of the country.<sup>160</sup>

Defectors were not popular in the Peoples Temple, and members who worked with Law Enforcement was willingly using their position of thrust and authority to stop other followers from trying to complain to police or other departments, since Jones pointed out that “if any of you have a mind to take your complaints elsewhere, we’ll find out about it. And you will be severely dealt with.”<sup>161</sup>

The Jungle commune was, due to its location in the middle of the jungle, like a fortress where nobody would enter unannounced unless they were either local citizens or the Guyanese Army. This made it easy for P.T. to stop its members from having too much contact with the outside world and relatives that might otherwise have talked them out of staying any longer, or even taken them out by force. Louis Gurvich<sup>162</sup>, working as a Private Investigator, had a daughter in the commune whom he tried to reach via ordinary channels, and when he saw that he was not able or allowed to even talk to her in Guyana, he decided to check the possibility of hiring special forces to do the job. However, he soon discovered that such an operation was nearly impossible to achieve. Upon voicing concern for his daughter with the United States diplomatic envoy in Guyana, he was told that there was no fence around Jonestown, but what was not told, was that there was no need for any fences, due to its location that made it a suicidal act to escape or try to enter.

After a while, the list of concerned relatives had grown so much, representatives of US authorities started to take notice, and one of them, Congressman Leo Ryan, traveled to Guyana and Jonestown, wanting to talk to Jim Jones and the members, offering them free passage if they decided to come with him back to the United States.

### **7.3 Quarrels within the Temple**

One of the reasons for arguments between defectors and the Peoples Temple, was the matter of child-custody, and the most famous example of this, is Timothy Stoen, who tells us that he did visit Jonestown from time to time in order to spend some time with a child he had granted Jones the custody of, but later regretted, claiming that he was literally tricked into signing the papers. He contemplated on trying to take his son with him when he visited him, but he, as others, found out that there was no way he could escape Jonestown with the boy.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Lane 1980; 102.

<sup>161</sup> Lane 1980; 281.

<sup>162</sup> Lane 1980; 323.

<sup>163</sup> Nugent 1979; 121.

However, the Temple's worst enemy was Jones himself who would seek the full obedience of his followers, making decisions all by himself without consulting his advisors. Mark Lane did advise a family to leave the commune after they had asked for a written guarantee that they could leave even after staying longer than November 18, 1978. His reason for doing so, however, was that if they really thought they needed that paper in order to be sure they were free to leave, then the statement would mean nothing. Jim Jones did not like what he had just told the family, but did not do anything other than looking at him.

There were also those who were afraid they would be sent back to the United States when Congressman Ryan came to visit them, and one member wrote a note to Jones, begging him to stop anything like that from happening.<sup>164</sup>

### **7.3.1 White nights prior to November 18 1978**

Several White Nights were arranged prior to the events on November 18, 1978, and it came to a point where the members no longer cared if they would live or die, and some even hoped they would not wake up in the morning after being through yet another rehearsal. Even the shooting of escapees was part of the rehearsals<sup>165</sup>, and probably under the excuse that they would use it as rat poison, large quantities of cyanide was smuggled in, but as John Peer Nugent writes, they were not intended for rats this time. In addition to the rehearsals of White Night, there was also an incident where they were about to kill themselves in September 1977, during a case where a Guyanese court had ordered a child residing in Jonestown to appear in the matter of a custodial dispute. They broadcasted their intent to commit suicide if the court order was not overturned, and after a number of phone calls to Guyanese government officials, the order was repealed, and the disaster had been avoided this time.<sup>166</sup> Marcelline Jones did not like what her husband was doing to his followers, and it is said that it took five security guards to stop her from harming, or even kill, Jim.

Charles A. Krause, in an attempt to understand what this movement was all about, asked Jim Jones several questions about their beliefs etc. got him to talk about what he thought about violence. "I do not believe in violence"<sup>167</sup>, Jones said to him, and went on to talk about how violence corrupts just as much as any use of power does. Obviously he did not see the mass suicide as violence or use of power, if we were to judge him from that statement

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<sup>164</sup> Kenyatta 2004; 162.

<sup>165</sup> Krause 1978; 60.

<sup>166</sup> Lane 1980; 327.

<sup>167</sup> Krause 1978; 48.

alone. But that is probably just another of the ramblings by a man who was growing increasingly ill.

#### **7.4 Arguments with US authorities**

Jim Jones was quite one-dimensional in his hostility and criticism toward the United States. His attitude towards them did not become any better when representatives from the US Embassy in Guyana, among them, the Consul Richard McCoy, came to Jonestown and wanted to interview certain members on the request of concerned relatives. McCoy did go on several such inspections, but the method he used for his investigations was to send a list of the persons he wanted to talk to prior to his arrival, and this gave Jim Jones time to rehearse the persons in question so that they would give answers that was favorable for him and the Temple<sup>168</sup>. McCoy went on claiming that if any “responsible member” came out and testified that there were abuses going on in Jonestown, the United States would react. The truth of it all is that no such reaction came even when Deborah Layton defected and wrote an affidavit testifying about what was really going on in Jonestown.

But then Congressman Leo Ryan came along after having received several letters from persons within his electoral district sharing their concern about family members who had left the United States to live in Jonestown. Ryan wrote a letter to Jim Jones and the Temple, telling them that he intended to visit them on the first available occasion, which made them send a letter in return, telling him that they might flee to the Soviet Union if such a visit took place. Ryan doubted the sincerity in that letter, pointing to the fact that they had already left the United States to live in Jonestown, Guyana. “Am I to understand, then, that all 1200 have already been asked if they would be willing to travel to yet another country and begin their lives, under what must already be difficult conditions at best?”<sup>169</sup> The “threat” to move to Soviet or any other country ruled by a communist regime was not the most serious of the behaviors Jim and his followers showed the outside world, and they would gladly tell US authorities or other powers that they felt worked against them that they would rather die than letting one of their members in the hands of authorities outside the Temple. John Peer Nugent writes that the United States Authorities failed in handling the situation with the Temple in a way that did not put people’s lives in danger. “When government officials are not positive in a particular matter of concern,” he writes “they usually seek counsel from specialists in that field. In this case, there is no indication that anyone requested a psychiatric interpretation of

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<sup>168</sup> Lane 1980; 132.

<sup>169</sup> Lane 1980; 107.

Jones's statements and actions.”<sup>170</sup> Neither did State Department or any other Governmental agencies inform Ryan that Jim Jones had suffered from a mental breakdown, and therefore he believed that a confrontation with Jones and the Temple would not get any more serious than a fistfight.<sup>171</sup>

Upon reaching Guyana, the Temple handed him a petition signed by 600 temple members urging him to refrain from entering the commune, but to no avail: Ryan was determined to reach Jonestown, and anything other than that would have been a serious blow to his reputation and political career, since he was followed, in addition to certain members of his own staff, by a group of concerned relatives and members of the mainstream news media. That is not the kind of people to appear in front of like a weak and powerless politician. Mark Lane, working as a Temple attorney and being in close contact with Jim Jones, warned him about forcing the issue with Jones since he was ill following his breakdown. But the visit went ahead as planned, and they spent a couple of days in Jonestown where the Temple arranged a party for them. It appeared a bit weird to Ryan and Charles A. Krause that 70 year old members were standing and clapping to soul music that was being played from the pavilion<sup>172</sup>. It was the popular music at that time, and usually enjoyed by youth and younger people, not persons that were over the retirement age. That remark was one of the things that, in the name of belated wisdom, would indicate that the P.T. were only putting on a disguise to give the appearance they were one big happy family and that the visit did not cause any real problem for them.

On the day the newest defectors were about to leave together with the rest of the group travelling with Ryan, a man named Don Sly attempted to kill the Congressman. That attempt on his life failed, and it all resulted in the US Consul promising to file a criminal complaint with Guyanese police as soon as he got back to Georgetown.

However, the same man was later that night put on guard duty in Jonestown, outside the hut where Lane was residing. It seems like detaining this person had no priority after Ryan and his travelling companions had left them.

#### **7.4.1 Media involvement**

Media is rightfully known as the “fourth estate” due to its power grip on public opinion. Jim Jones knew the importance of having good relations to the media, and used them a lot during his time in the United States to win popularity. However, his relationship to the

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<sup>170</sup> Nugent 1979; 157.

<sup>171</sup> Nugent 1979; 176.

<sup>172</sup> Krause 1978; 45.

media deteriorated, and on one occasion he even got Guyanese authorities to deny one of them entry into the country.<sup>173</sup> However, despite Jones not being at good terms with every journalist out there, they did not all believe the stories told by defectors about Jonestown being some sort of a Gulag. Quite frankly, for journalists like Krause the anti-cultists appeared as mad-men who most likely had made up most of the stories about the conditions in the commune.

The media coverage of the Peoples Temple issue prior to November 18 1978 was rather poor, and in San Francisco, where the Temple had one of its largest congregations, only one newspaper by the name of “San Francisco Progress” published allegations that a White Night might occur in Jonestown which would result in the death of hundreds of people, as a threat towards the concerned relatives that desired to get out family members.

But the media as a whole neglected the warnings by the Temple, and Mark Lane describes this as a criminal neglect, and that newspapers like the Washington Post should be held responsible for sending one of their reporters to Jonestown without warning him about what trouble may lie ahead of him.<sup>174</sup> One of the lessons learned by the media in this regard, was that in the jungle, “a press card was just another piece of paper.”<sup>175</sup> Their presence in Jonestown was hardly desired by any of the inhabitants, and it was at least the attempt by Temple leadership to block them from entering along with Congressman Ryan. However, the Congressman insisted that every one of them be let in. The presence of journalists in Jonestown did not pass unnoticed, and there were arguments between them and the Temple members about what areas they were allowed to see and photograph, like for instance the houses where they lived and slept under cramped conditions. That was one of the less flattering areas of the commune, and therefore Temple lawyers like Mark Lane did not want them to see them and broadcast the pictures. Mark Lane, still acting out of the principle that he represents the Temple, comments that the arrogance of the Media could have played a role in the mass murders that followed.<sup>176</sup> Jim Jones and the leadership had resentment towards journalists, and that resentment became more and more a common trait among the members the more time the press spent in Jonestown. After a while, Ryan did also agree with Lane in thinking that it might have been for the better if he had not brought journalists with him, even though they were relatively respectful towards the inhabitants of the settlement, at least if you relate it to how their colleagues later on would loot the commune after the mass murder, who

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<sup>173</sup> Krause 1978; 15.

<sup>174</sup> Lane 1980; 126.

<sup>175</sup> Krause 1978; 85.

<sup>176</sup> Lane 1980; 148.

stole priceless materials like confidential files that included embarrassing documentation regarding some indiscretions on the part of Guyanese officials, that was most likely used by the Temple for the purpose of blackmailing them.<sup>177</sup>

Surely, the news media has always been known for their “muck raking”, and it is only natural that Jones and his Temple came in some sort of disagreement with members of the press corps, but as I have been trying to show in this part, the fifth estate were as much in the dark as the rest of United States when it came to interpreting the signs that Peoples Temple may constitute a danger both to themselves and others.

### **7.5 Mass Suicide or Mass Murder?**

*Rather, the question of Jonestown is that of return to America. To understand Jonestown, we must see our country, our church, ourselves as the nine hundred saw us.*<sup>178</sup>

But what was the mass death in Guyana: a mass murder or in fact a mass suicide? The Temple grew increasingly violent for each passing year, and there was even a hit list on people that would be “made to pay”<sup>179</sup> if Jones were killed. The accuracy that was shown when they attacked the travelers at the Port Kaituma airstrip, killing key persons like Ryan and the recent defectors from Jonestown, would indicate that they were a violent group and also a form of “a carefully muted aggressiveness”<sup>180</sup> as Katherine V. Kemp and John R. Lion, professors of psychiatry at the University of Maryland School of Medicine are quoted by Krause.

According to Mark Lane and John Peer Nugent, a heavily armed security force oversaw the whole ritual, and when they felt the people were hesitating or just went too slowly forward, they would push them, and if necessary force them to take the poison. Jones wanted the children to take the poison first. That way their parents would have no choice but to swallow it themselves afterwards. While many of the members opposed the mass death, they were stopped from the other members, and also denied access to the microphone. One of the lucky ones to get to speak against the carnage got the reply from the others that her life had been extended to that particular day, all thanks to Jones, and therefore she owed it to

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<sup>177</sup> Nugent 1979; 234.

<sup>178</sup> Kenyatta 2004; 163.

<sup>179</sup> Lane 1980; 257.

<sup>180</sup> Krause 1978; 119.

Jones to lay down her life for him on that evening. This is why the FBI concluded that the deaths were a collected will by the majority.

However, when the member in California received the message they should commit “revolutionary suicide” themselves, they did not feel the immediate need to join their brothers in Jonestown on that particular enterprise. Jones did not have the power over them that he seems to have had over his followers in Guyana, where even three members in the Georgetown office killed themselves with kitchen knives.

It is very likely that they would have committed this “revolutionary suicide” even if it had not happened on that particular day. It could have been another trial where they threatened to take members away from them, another official that triggered Jim Jones’ psychosis in the collective will and incentivized them to take exactly the same steps that they did when Congressman Ryan and the journalists had visited them. The philosophical foundation for these actions had already been written and published<sup>181</sup>, so there should be no doubt, at least today, that they really intended to end the Temple this way. The fact that Jones was most likely drugged and not entirely in control of himself, does not contradict this.

Among the several contradictions that Jones and the Temple contained, was that they talked about a craving to be left alone, they were also afraid that the world would forget them<sup>182</sup>, or at least not notice them, something which they stopped from becoming reality when finalizing the Temple the way that they did. But the cold fact of it all is that 918 lives<sup>183</sup> were lost in a tragedy that should have been avoided, and maybe could have been avoided on an earlier stage. Murder or suicide? The Jonestown massacre begun with the killing of Ryan and the people who were traveling with him. For them, it was not a voluntary act. Members in the commune who actively opposed the so-called “revolutionary” act were effectively voiced down by the majority under Jim Jones’ guidance. For them, it was not a choice that they themselves took, and what really separates suicide from murder, is that it is supposed to be a voluntary act. Many of the Jonestown residents were forced to take the poison, and those who tried to run away were either caught and the poison forcibly administered into their body, or they were shot by the security forces. Therefore I can only conclude that they were murdered in what was a decision made by the majority heavily influenced and led by Jim Jones.

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<sup>181</sup> Lane 1980; 332.

<sup>182</sup> Pinn 2004; 21.

<sup>183</sup> Moore 2004; 61.

## 8 Discussion

*The prophetic line gives us another commandment, to deal with life after birth. And that's what I'm concerned about: life after birth.*<sup>184</sup>

According to Mary R. Sawyer, many of the Temple survivors who felt Jones' presence, he had an almost supernatural charisma that they believed was powers of good that were in the course of time turned into forces of evil.<sup>185</sup> It could easily be agreed that the Temple did a lot of good work, at least while they were still based in the United States and had not fully taken of the hermit figure they would show to the world in its later years. However, the horrifying end is something we can not avoid taking into consideration when talking about the Temple. If we do not do that, we may once again find a tragedy like this happening, like it did with the Heavens Gate society in 1997.<sup>186</sup> Unless we listen to and understand the message that the Peoples Temple tragedy gives us, we might one day find another Jim Jones have tampered with the lives and freedoms of youths and elders alike. J. Alfred Smith writes that within the context of religious experience, there is the need to ask the question what it was within the Black Church that Jones addressed and the black churches themselves did not.<sup>187</sup> And during the course of writing this paper, I have tried to focus on the Temple as an organization with a white leader but rooted within the African American religious movements.

### 8.1 Social Action

Jones was the man who primarily ran the Temple, even though many in the leadership wanted him gone since he was more and more in the way of Temple prosperity as the years passed by. But was it to the man or the organization that they had their allegiance? One of the former members wrote a letter to one of the columnists in the San Francisco Chronicle that his "total dedication" was not towards Jim Jones but to an organization of "people who had nothing left to lose." He argued that the most relevant truth is that the Temple was "filled with outcasts and the poor who were looking for something they could not find in our society."<sup>188</sup> And that is something we have also touched in this thesis. One of the problems with Jim Jones' ministry is that he was too dominant in his sermons. Archie Smith Jr. points to a model

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<sup>184</sup> Smith 2004; 141.

<sup>185</sup> Sawyer 2004; 176.

<sup>186</sup> Catherine Wessinger: "How The Millennium Comes Violently". Available from <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/AboutJonestown/Articles/millennium.htm> Internet; accessed 19 May 2010.

<sup>187</sup> Smith 2004; 157.

<sup>188</sup> Nugent 1979; 246.



of cooperative enterprise, which means a shared ministry where no single person has the responsibility for the congregation alone. As with so many other cases where persons who love power share the same responsibility, there will always be the risk that they do not manage to see their own limitations and are unable to cooperate with each others. The idea of social action is also something that he feels should be implemented in the Church.<sup>189</sup> Individual liberation is seen as part of this idea, since he points out the importance of the right for every person to assert himself when relating to the Pastor. A social action where the religious community is involved, should not be driven by one “strong” man alone, but instead be an operation where the participants are equals no matter what formal title they may have inside or outside the congregation.

One thing necessary to understand the Peoples Temple must be that it came to life in the context of American society and culture. It could be easy to regard the concept of the Government running institutions like medical clinics, hospitals, etc. as rather unproblematic, and many of us do not see the need for privatization of such basic facilities. In the United States, however, the question of privatization is an entirely different matter, and many of them regard any attempt to give the Government power over things like hospitals, schools or even prisons as a bad thing, and the urge to call something like that socialism or communism is deeply rooted in the souls of a people that wants the Government to have as little as possible to do with the day-to-day life of each individual. Minarchism is strong, and it is not a coincidence that it is almost considered the homeland of Libertarianism and the ideas of a completely voluntary society where charity takes care of those who are unemployed, poor or otherwise has got a need that they themselves are unable to achieve with assets of their own. In essence the US society is built on the principle that everyone has the ability to achieve the goals they set, but if you are born into poverty or otherwise get into circumstances that are bad for you, then you are mostly on your own. That was the issue during the years the Temple was founded, and still is.

## ***8.2 The religious human***

The biggest question remains: How can a new Jonestown be avoided in the future? Can we avoid it? As long as we are all free to make our own decisions and live by the ways and beliefs that we want, there will be bad choices that lead persons on a destructive path like the one of the Peoples Temple Members in Jonestown, Guyana. However, I have been talking

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<sup>189</sup> Smith 2004; 54.

in this thesis about religious longings existing among the members of the Peoples Temple, and also among humans in general.

Earlier, I have presented two definitions<sup>190</sup> of religion, one being the dictionary definition that revolves around the belief in the supernatural, and that it may involve ritual observances and the belief in a divinely inspired moral code that regulates human conduct. The other one, by Archie Smith Jr. puts his emphasis on religion as an inadequate answer to the longings and demands of society, and that the joiners are seeking a figure of authority. Both of them can be said to hold some truth in the case of the Peoples Temple and the persons who joined the movement, since the organization gave them a direction and a teaching to obey, but they still found themselves in a religious group that in the end proved to be unable to fulfill their needs completely, but they met a man who spoke to them with conviction and authority, something that made many members believe him and stay in the Temple.

In a sense, they were looking for a figure of authority, and they found it in the Temple. Especially the African-Americans were tricked by the ideas and teachings of Jim Jones, since he was both giving them what many of them were in need of but did not have the resources to get themselves, and also since his way of doing his sermons was something that appealed to the African Americans.

In chapter 4.1 I gave a description of some of the people who became members, and both their histories prior to joining the Temple, and the reason why they joined and remained in the Temple, were interesting since it gives us a picture of their drivers for doing what they did. Even though not all of them had tragic backgrounds, their reasons for staying inside the Temple had a common thread in that they had found a community to belong to, a place to stay, a common cause to strive for, and a charismatic leader who dared not only talk about the problems, but also do something about them. Many of the authors I have referred to in this thesis are on to the fact that the problem was not only on a personal level, but also an organizational level, in the fact that the Churches did not do the job of protecting their “flock” against falling into the hands of any organization like the Peoples Temple. They did not address the issues that people around them were dealing with, like poverty, social injustice, racism and the feeling of not being able to do anything about circumstances like these, since there was no organization they could turn to. Since the Peoples Temple stood out as the only group able and willing to offer them that kind of services, they naturally went there and staid there.

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<sup>190</sup> See chapter 4.2 and 5.

### **8.2.1 What did the Temple have to offer them?**

Judging from what I have discovered in writing this thesis, three factors came out as the main things that Jones and the P.T. was able to offer the individual which the other church organizations did not delve into sufficiently: They gave them 1) a feeling of being in a community where they belonged, 2) a common goal for the members to work towards, and 3) a very charismatic leader that knew how to reach the hearts of his followers, get things moving with respect to social initiatives and how to encourage his followers and building up their self-esteem as needed. That is three elements that make for a powerful combination, and combined with the lack of similar traits in the traditional churches, the market was cornered by Jones.

### **8.3 What went wrong?**

Peoples Temple attracted persons that were in search of a community where they could work towards a common goal and still have the feeling of being part of a family or community. African Americans came in all sorts of social status, from poor to wealthy, either they were in need, or they wanted to take part in the good works of the organization, but what must have been the main element for their attraction is the similarities it had with the black religious culture, combined with the charisma of Jim Jones. I mentioned earlier<sup>191</sup> that one of the survivors remarked how obvious it had become, after he was dead, that Jim Jones was a white man. It is not that the members did not know this before, but instead the fact that he was white would increase his factor of authority, especially when combined with the black preaching style.<sup>192</sup>

For many, the Temple represented a possibility no other organization at that time and place had to offer them, so naturally they sought to become members, and became trapped in the workings of a controlling and coercive cult. But there are many such cults out there who could be controlling towards its members, so what was it that made things different with the Temple? Jonestown could best be said to resemble a concentration camp, due to the presence of armed guards and the constant pressure on the inhabitants to work hard, get small amounts of sleep and the leader giving speeches and putting pressure on them. As mentioned earlier, such conditions tends to make persons more receptive of ideas and orders that they would otherwise reject if they had a clear mind and the freedom to reflect on what was happening around them.

This is why I would argue that the biggest misfortune for the members was the move to Guyana, which for most of them represented a road with no return. They moved in order to

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<sup>191</sup> See chapter 7.1

<sup>192</sup> Smith 2004; 152.

find a new life, but Jim Jones was becoming mentally unstable and made the Temple fall into seclusion while letting them rehearse for a mass suicide. Of course, the visit by Congressman Ryan along with a cobbler of journalists, could at that time have been a triggering factor for the final White Night, but they were headed for destruction way before that, so it is likely that they would have committed a mass suicide later on, unless there had been a coup by the only group that was able to do something like that: the armed security guards. After the Temple had moved to Jonestown along with Jones, a coup by the guards was probably the only thing that could have saved them from death.

#### ***8.4 And what could be done to avoid such tragedies in the future?***

The main thread of this work has been that those who joined Peoples Temple came into the organization either because they needed help or because they wanted to help others. In both cases they were getting something in return which society as a whole had failed to provide them. I do not think that the solution to this issue is difficult to implement, nor does it contain an absolute guarantee that it would work.

It is important that the Churches and other organizations, religious or otherwise, dares to take a stand in society and stand up for what they believe is right. Charismatic leadership is not necessarily what is called for, but the clergy should be willing to listen to what their congregation feels is important for them and the church to get involved in, and there is a need to raise a healthy leadership that is willing to share responsibility with other pastors and the congregation itself to work the church as a democratic organization. From society as a whole, there is the need to accept human beings not only as members of society, but also as beings in search for answers in the sphere of religion and to be aware that religion is just another aspect of humanity that should be subject to open discussion. That way, it will be harder for a religious leader to gain foothold as the absolute truth and authority, since the traditional churches and the secular society will be able to compete with the cult-leaders claim on authority.

## 9 Conclusion

Jim Jones and his Temple came about in a time where the dogmas of society was becoming more and more relative, and the individuals came out searching for meaningful things to put their lives into, and in some cases they were in situations that demanded they get help either because of economic problems, starvation, etc. They came to the Temple since it was the only place where their needs for fulfillment and direction was offered them at that time, and the fact that they were dealing with a character of such a great charisma, did make the choice to join the movement a lot easier.

They got something to live for, and their lives got meaning, often in great contrast to what they left behind. Since the Peoples Temple had a black majority, and Jim Jones, despite being white, focused on African worship traditions, I dedicated part of chapter four to the details that this entailed, and it was used in part to explain how Jones managed to have such an appeal to, and control over, his followers with respect to the “call and response” technique that stems from African American Pentecostal tradition.

P.T. clearly stands out as a socialistic organization, but it has not been easy pointing out whether or not it was based on the Christian faith, since the member mass was not a homogenous one. I therefore concluded that it was to be considered a New Religious Movement outside the Christian influence, but that individuals within the organization still held on to their Christian faiths despite Jim Jones not being particularly fond of the Christian faith and what he considered the “sky god”.

Their focus was on trying to revolutionize the world and make it a better place. People came to them because they wanted to make a difference, and the part of serving a deity did not have the same priority. Being part of an extended family was also a good thing for many of the members, having a place and organization where they could belong, and where they were respected and loved, unlike many other political organizations that did not have these elements in them.

The three models of cult innovation by Bainbridge and Stark are very useful in describing and explaining P.T. and how it was founded, and while there may be similarities with the Entrepreneur Model, Jones and the Temple are mostly found to belong in the Psychopathology Model due to the leader and his craving for psychological rewards gained from his devoted followers in return for his charismatic leadership and call for social action and reform in the community.

But in the end, their move to Jonestown represented a social encapsulation and deterioration of their mental capabilities that would cost them their lives. The isolation can be

split into three types: communicative, social and physical, and evolves around the idea of keeping the cult members into seclusion with respect to internal terminology, keeping them strictly in the company of other members and letting them live in dormitories and communes where they only relate to other believers.

There is no single solution that will work perfectly if we are to stop another Jonestown from happening, but the secular society and any church or religious society has the need for transparency towards cult-leaders and their claim on absolute authority over their followers. With a society that respects each individual with religious yearning for what they are, and a clergy that is being adamant of what they believe and dares to stand up against injustice, the position of a cult-leader can more easily be challenged, and we will stand a much better chance of avoiding another Jonestown from happening in the future.

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