

Peoples Temple

A Lost Legacy for the Current Moment

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ABSTRACT: What is the legacy of Peoples Temple? Forty years after the events at Jonestown it seems that “Jonestown” has solidified itself as a landmark moment in American religious history. Jonestown has become synonymous with the problems of charismatic religious leadership and religious violence. Yet, the group who died at Jonestown, Peoples Temple, is largely unknown to people who reference the Jonestown murders/suicides. This article argues that revisiting Peoples Temple’s goals of apostolic socialism and racial reconciliation offer important insights for understanding the group’s legacy that can contribute insight into ways of solving ongoing social problems related to poverty and racial inequality in the United States.

KEYWORDS: Peoples Temple, Jonestown, race, class, socialism

Jonestown’s legacy is arguably solidified just forty short years after the events of 18 November 1978 shook the world. Nine hundred nine people were found dead, their bodies stacked upon each other and rotting in the Guyana sun. A congressman and four others were dead at a nearby airstrip, while four more were found slain in Georgetown, the capital city. Headlines soon shook the world as *Newsweek* and *Time* magazines both featured covers that labeled the movement the “Cult of Death.” Each issue superimposed the title over an unforgettable image of Jonestown: *Newsweek* displayed the corpses

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lined side by side in the field and *Time* portrayed the metal bucket that held the Flavor Aid laced with cyanide that the group's members drank that caused their deaths.

Jonestown has become iconic: it is a word that evokes a group of nameless people who were led to their deaths by their pastor, Jim Jones, now the symbol of a charismatic leader gone horribly wrong and a messenger of death. It is less a place than a cautionary tale about blindly following religious ideals. People know Jonestown. They know not to "drink the Kool-Aid." This phrase is evoked as a warning against suspect religious authority. It is used to encourage people to turn away from religious leaders and embrace the American ideal of self-directed autonomous thought. Ask people where Jonestown was and they cannot tell you. Ask them the name of at least one person who died there besides Jones and, unless they are a relative or scholar of the movement, they will present a blank stare. Ask them the name of the group that founded, built, lived in, sang at, struggled at, and eventually died at Jonestown and see if they can give the answer: Peoples Temple.

Peoples Temple is a group with an untapped legacy. A controversial, convoluted movement of thousands of people who mixed socialism, interracial politics, and Christianity into a religious organization that had survived since the 1950s, moved from Indianapolis, Indiana, to Redwood Valley, California, before migrating south to San Francisco and Los Angeles, and eventually to Jonestown, Guyana. Along the way, like any other religious organization, people joined and left, leadership inspired some and left others bitter, people got married and divorced, lovers quarreled, and the love of God was preached with a distinctive mixture that made sense within the group's demographics and historical context. In the midst of this normality, the ambitious and charismatic man at the church's center attracted attention from all quarters. The group also did some things that were odd and radical, quickly moving to expand its ministry so that it reached into social services for the elderly, scholarships for students, and treatment for drug addicts. There were faith healing services and the claim that Jones had paranormal powers of prophecy and healing. There were internal discussions about the end of the world and socialist living. In some ways Peoples Temple is a group that looks like any of the thousands of churches that dot the American landscape. In other ways, it looks to be among the most extreme of charismatic religions with its claims to Jones' status as an anointed prophet of God (and eventually his claims that he was God), combined with a socialist movement in the post-war United States.

Peoples Temple has always struck me as one of the most fascinating cases in the study of what have been called new religious movements since it is forgotten by most who are not scholars. Peoples Temple is forgotten in light of Jonestown. Peoples Temple does not matter in most accounts except as a foil for the salacious activities of the

charismatic, manipulative, and destructive Jones. The members of Peoples Temple are largely treated as nameless, faceless, and ultimately unimportant props in Jones' story.¹ Yet, what those thousands managed to accomplish is a story worth taking seriously four decades after the Temple's demise. After all, the members were largely working class, laboring for interracial justice, and dedicated to trying to survive a cataclysmic war that seemed just around the corner. As I wrote this article in 2017, these concerns struck me as perennially pertinent in our age. Indeed, as stories circulated that the median annual wage for American workers was \$30,533.31 and that forty-nine percent of Americans made \$30,000 or less in 2016;² that the middle class is increasingly being squeezed out of existence; that the global gap between the extremely wealthy and the poor continues to widen; that political malaise with major parties and political systems as shown in Brexit in the United Kingdom, the election of Donald Trump in the United States, and the growth in right-wing nationalist parties in Europe continues; that racial violence by police officers against people of color in the United States raises questions of injustice and inequality that have plagued the nation for centuries; and that as people continue to come to terms with the fact that the United States has been engaged in ongoing foreign wars in Afghanistan and Iraq since 2001, there is a real sense that the fears Peoples Temple members held were not momentary. They organized themselves to fight against issues that have become endemic within American and global society. Peoples Temple's legacy is one that has yet to be examined for potential solutions to problems we find facing us today. Indeed, the movement's history is so tainted by the shadow of Jim Jones and Jonestown that the positive elements that drew people to the movement are contaminated. The question is whether the movement is contaminated beyond redemption.

This article argues that Peoples Temple's time in Redwood Valley and San Francisco (1965–1977) can provide clues as to how to create a religious organization that resists the atomizing pressures that contemporary global capitalism is placing upon people. The movement's treatment of seniors, its communal living arrangements, and the pooling of resources enabled people to live full, if frugal, lives. It also existed for almost three decades as an interracial congregation that explicitly addressed racism in the United States. That is not to say that there were not problems before Jonestown. At every turn in Peoples Temple's history there were warning signs, such as the increased elevation of Jones' status to "God-man;" the violent physical and emotional practices that became part of Temple routine; the predominantly white leadership in a majority black church; and the criminality of some Temple activities. However, this article focuses on the elements of communal living and racial integration instead of the better-known narratives of Peoples

Temple and Jonestown.³ This history is worth revisiting because as income and wealth inequality continue to grow across the developed world, and questions of racial inequity persist in the United States, Peoples Temple may provide some clues about how to leverage the power of collective religious ties and create a viable organization that both serves its local membership and is tied into the shared life of the community in which it is embedded.

THE INTELLECTUAL FOUNDATION

Even a cursory perusal of Jones' sermons and speeches and Peoples Temple's materials points to the importance of "apostolic socialism" with the group. There is precedent for communal living throughout Christian history—most notably in monasteries—based on Acts 2:44–45 ("All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need") and Acts 4:32 ("Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common") (NRSV). Within the Temple, apostolic socialism took on a distinctive interpretation that met the class and racial context of post-1960s America. In a sermon delivered in the early 1970s, Jones defined apostolic socialism as the kingdom of heaven as a reality here on earth (Q1059-2).⁴ "Love is apostolic communalism where there is *total* equality. There are no barriers in the family of God or Christ" (Q1023).⁵ Peoples Temple's earliest formations were based around building a church that emphasized racial equality with communalism becoming more essential (but never total) within the group after it moved from Indiana to Redwood Valley and eventually San Francisco. Indeed, this intellectual foundation is worth reexamining in light of the contemporary situations that millions of people in the United States are currently facing.

Socialism was sacralized within Peoples Temple and David Chidester argues that socialism became a "superhuman" concept in Jones' ideology.⁶ Socialism was equated with God, over and against the "Skygod" concept that came from traditional Christianity. In one sermon Jones preached, "If you're sympathetic to socialism and learn my teachings, I can teach you how to master death."⁷ Jones equated socialism with God and himself with socialism, saying, "And I say *my way*, only in the term that *my way* is God socialism's way. I don't do *anything* but to help you. I don't do anything but to *save* you."⁸ In another sermon he claimed, "I have entered into that which you said was God in the suppositional sky, but never came near you. I am God almighty. Socialism."⁹ Drawing from Jones' preaching it is easy to conflate

socialism, Jones, and God and to forget the pragmatic application of apostolic socialism to everyday life in the Temple. In one of his 1973 sermons, Jones even went so far as to say,

I'm not talking about the pragmatics to build socialism. And I would build socialism by any means possible. *I'm* talking about things that happen from the evolution of the consciousness of socialism God, as we call socialism, that *consciousness* has brought an evolution that does miracles. Man calls them. We call them perfectly normal. Just *extra-normal*, *paranormal*, we'd say it's just quite *ordinary*, but believe me in such an atmosphere, we cannot do *anything* but succeed.¹⁰

When considering the Temple's legacy, then, we do not want to focus only on what Jones thought, but his words do reveal insight into the sacralized nature of socialism within the group. Historian Catherine Abbott argues that the Temple became more politically active as Jones preached more aggressively against capitalism. Although Jones displayed an interest in socialism and communism early in his career, the Temple became a powerful political machine in San Francisco when it started helping Democratic politicians get elected.¹¹ The Temple's external politics and Jones' preaching are not the most salient lessons to take from the Temple's history. As I will argue, Jones' megalomania was a significant problem that ultimately doomed the Temple that was so loyal to him. Peoples Temple did, however, enact apostolic socialism in ways that remain relevant for understanding why people joined the Temple and why it was successful.

The church put apostolic socialism into practice during its time in Indiana through the founding of food ministries for the poor, developing nursing home and elder care programs, and pursuing racial integration in its Indianapolis congregation. From those humble beginnings, Peoples Temple developed into a social ministry organization in California. As the group moved toward self-sufficiency in Redwood Valley it attracted idealistic and educated young white people whose skills as social workers, administrators, activists, lawyers, and nurses would be put to use by the Temple. We should not forget that the Temple rose to prominence by building on a foundation of offering social services for those who could not access quality standards of care or justice. The church ran senior care homes and was able to help people with legal issues because apostolic socialism gave members an ideological foundation from which to build larger institutional structures. It also helped members, such as Annie Moore who became a nurse, to gain their educations and credentials, which they then put to use within the Temple's services. Without the call to give what they had to the church and work for God's purposes here on Earth, the members' social justice work would have been more fragmented and possibly run through bureaucracies that were less flexible than the Temple's. This is

not to say that social justice work cannot be done in other venues, but that Peoples Temple was particularly good at finding local niche ministries and building solutions to local problems.

Apostolic socialism raises a number of practical questions, some of which Peoples Temple arguably executed well; others, not so much. The question of how we should live as communities led to a tight-knit and highly controlled group, especially in San Francisco where poor and working-class urban African Americans were incorporated into the Temple organization in large numbers. Practically, this was facilitated by a mixture of Christian apostolic socialism, a few members' interpretations of Marx and other communist writers, and radical black politics that became more important in the Temple's ideology after the move to San Francisco. Some interpretations of Peoples Temple and Jonestown make an implicit argument that the more the group moved toward communal living and political action, the more it changed into something other than a Christian church. Religion scholar Mary McCormick Maaga, for example, argues that Peoples Temple was three groups in one: an Indiana sect, a California new religious movement, and a black urban church, depending on which members and time period are examined.¹²

Perhaps the most interesting categorization in Maaga's work is that the group that joined during the Redwood Valley period was a "cult" in the classic sociological sense. That is, Peoples Temple and especially Jim Jones were something new and different from everything else members had experienced. The well-educated whites who joined in the early to mid-1960s and who quickly became the Temple's leadership cadre were attracted by a mixture of "Pentecostal revivalism, divine healings, charismatic leadership, and an interracial social gospel ministry."¹³ It is entirely relevant that Maaga categorizes this group as a new religious movement as opposed to a sect or church. Doing so emphasizes the idea that Marxist/communist thought is somehow not part of the Christian lives among certain members.

In fact, the "Letter from Eight Revolutionaries"—an apologia written by eight young adults who defected in 1973—contains a stinging Marxist critique of the leadership while absolving Jim Jones at the same time.¹⁴ Reading the letter, one could be forgiven for thinking that for these members, at least, Peoples Temple was a religious front for a communist organization that had little to do with Christian ideas. The letter itself is an indictment of the Temple leadership, arguing that they are white capitalists who care only about sex and money. While one paragraph on page five mentions that Carolyn Layton "doesn't prayes [*sic*] nor participates," there are no references to Christian doctrine in the letter. Instead, the letter focuses on a question from page four that summarizes the defectors' standards for leadership: "What kind of awareness do they have about socialism?" This question speaks to the Revolutionaries'

standards for leadership—an understanding of socialist principles and ideals as taught by Jim Jones, and not being white. The letter is revealing in that it exonerates Jones from any responsibility while also questioning the implicit racism of the Temple's leadership which comprised few black leaders and instead consisted of white people who were quickly elevated to leadership positions over long-serving African American members. Yet, it is the letter's final paragraph that is most telling as to the critics' ideology:

We want it known by you and staff that we don't believe in religion we don't believe in god we don't believe in reincarnation we don't believe in impossible we are not concerned with the beginning, the end, or the here after—we are only concerned about today.¹⁵

The eight revolutionaries' perspective, however, should not be taken as the only view of the Temple's mission. Indeed, scholars are widely agreed that Jones' mixture of charismatic faith healing and prophetic preaching were powerful draws for members.¹⁶ Jones also spoke about reincarnation and it is clear that his preaching and ideology evolved over time.¹⁷ However, as Maaga argues, we do not want to mistake Jones' sermons for the members' ideologies.¹⁸ The Temple's publications speak to faith healing and Jones' claims to be prophetic; members also circulated pamphlets on Christian teaching that would be at home in many Protestant congregations. For example, the one-page document "A True Follower of This Activist Christian Ministry" claims that the true follower

SHOULD HAVE A DISCIPLINED REASON . . . and not do things impulsively. His actions should be of such a character as not to cause dread. He renounces his accomplishments and takes no thought for the fruit of his work. "But his delight is in the law of the (Good Shepherd); and in his law doth he meditate (and act upon) day and night" (Psalms 1:2).

Furthermore, it goes on to state that

If you find the greatest peace in the smile of a child, or the feel of a breeze, or the myriad formations of the sky, it is not because you are a vain dreamer, but because you have begun to reach that place of self-denial or detachment that one must attain to, to be free of ego and self love. As scripture has stated, one must deny self and take up his own cross in order to follow the Christ (Luke 9:23).¹⁹

Language and references such as these dominate Temple literature from the 1960s to mid-1970s and there is no reason to think that members did not believe in some traditional Christian tenets, even if Jones himself shows continuous movement away from American Protestant Christianity. Apostolic socialism, then, should be seen as

a religio-political strategy that had a particular manifestation in Peoples Temple. The idea itself is not exclusive to the group, but in its manifestation in Peoples Temple it is shaped by Jones' personal conviction that he had special powers, his anger at poverty and human misery, the belief that he was a God-man, and the fact that members of the group emphasized socialism more than Christianity. For analytical purposes, we might want to refrain from seeing apostolic socialism as something that inevitably led to Jonestown. Instead, we want to see if this idea led to ideas and actions worth emulating in the contemporary world and if so, what are they and why are they worth emulating?

It is also important to keep in mind that apostolic socialism was not an unmitigated blessing. In practice it could look like a nightmare. Activities like those conducted by the Planning Commission—the leadership group responsible for conducting disciplinary sessions that included spanking and paddling, boxing matches, verbal abuse, and sexual humiliation—might give one pause when considering joining an organization that accepted Peoples Temple's version of apostolic socialism.²⁰ “The cause,” which was also used to justify Jones' extramarital affairs and which sometimes blurred the line between Jones the man and Jones' message, is troubling, as is the philosophy of “the end justifies the means.” The question of Jones' charismatic leadership and authority within the Temple and the way that his proclivities became part of the Temple's institutional infrastructure are deep issues of historical context. Jones' influence throughout all levels of the Temple serves as a warning about charismatic leaders' unchecked power. Yet, the power that Jones was able to wield at the end of the San Francisco period is not the same as when the group was in Indiana. In other words, the social dynamics of Peoples Temple changed with each geographic move, which also transformed the church's membership and, ultimately, Jones' ability to wield both hard and soft power within the Temple. For those studying the Temple the question remains whether the practice of apostolic socialism is worth rescuing and reevaluating in other contexts. That said, in light of contemporary social structural problems in American society there are at least two aspects of Temple life that sprang from apostolic socialism worth reconsidering: institutional changes to mitigate economic inequality and attempts at racial integration.

COMMUNAL LIVING IN A WORLD OF GROWING INEQUALITY

Not all members of Peoples Temple lived communally. Communal living was, however, a major characteristic of Temple life going back to the Redwood Valley period when the group first relocated to northern California from Indiana; at least 500 members were living communally

during the San Francisco period.²¹ Bolstered in part by their socialist ideology, the group joined a long history of American experiments in religious intentional living.²² Historian Timothy Miller estimates that the Temple ran between 19 and 70 communal homes in San Francisco, “many of them populated by elderly persons who made substantial financial donations and were promised care for life.”²³ My reading of the FBI’s list of addresses for members who migrated to Guyana identified at least 30 addresses and 464 members who lived communally.²⁴ During the Redwood Valley period the Temple became adept at acquiring property and then running senior care homes out of those buildings. It also utilized funds that seniors signed over to the Temple. This financial base helped run the Temple with considerable benefit to members. Hall writes,

Elderly Temple members, children in the juvenile justice system, and others who qualified for welfare assistance often could have their dealings with the welfare bureaucracy managed by Temple social workers, and Peoples Temple in effect operated a client advocacy program that offered its own facilities to house eligible individuals.²⁵

This pattern of acquiring properties, asking people to make large donations (either in the form of signing over property or making substantial tithes), having Temple members work long hours at small salaries or with no financial compensation, and redistributing the results to members was expanded after the group relocated its headquarters to San Francisco. According to Hall, “For the people who worked their ways further and further into the organization, apostolic socialism was not a lofty dream. The communal organization of Peoples Temple became their social world.”²⁶

Apostolic socialism took on a specific form in Peoples Temple during the California period, which is partly what drew movement leaders like Carolyn Layton. According to her sister, Rebecca Moore, Layton was raised to be dedicated to the poor and dispossessed and it

was our own religious training that made Carolyn an activist and prepared her for Peoples Temple. The message of the Bible was clear: serve the poor. But the churches she’d known didn’t seem to care about the poor, at least, not enough.²⁷

In the Temple, members found opportunities for a wide variety of human services ministries that met the ideological needs of people like Layton and who helped build the Temple’s financial base. Possessing a talent pool of dedicated care workers, the Temple expanded its mission in ways that pushed the accepted definitions of what services a religious organization can offer in the United States. Yet, this led to some questionable practices in money management. According to Hall, the

Temple did not pay taxes on the income from rental properties and that operations such as financing care homes for member operators would not fit the Internal Revenue Service's guidelines for nonprofit churches.²⁸ In other words, the Temple did not properly report unrelated business income from its revenue-generating enterprises. While members saw care homes as part of the Temple's ministry, the IRS did not agree.

These financial irregularities would later become part of the Concerned Relatives' complaints that were voiced in the famous 1977 *New West* article that documented Temple practices that would be seen as dangerous, corrupt, or even criminal by average citizens; the reporters called for a full investigation of the Temple.²⁹ The article, which ostensibly sped up the exodus to Jonestown, serves as a reminder that the Temple was able to execute its mission in part due to its nonprofit status because it was operating programs that brought donations into the church in the form of social security checks and by having members sign over their property to the Temple. While some people may find such financial strategies inappropriate, religious groups today enjoy the benefits of this tax break, which is in the tax code.

With these caveats in mind, we can nevertheless see that one of the lessons of Peoples Temple is that being registered as a religious nonprofit enabled people to work collectively to live in a way that enriched many, if not most, members beyond their meager means. Hall calculated, "If the value of Temple assets is allocated among the 913 Temple members who died in Guyana, Temple holdings per person in November of 1978 come to around \$12,000 per person, even less if allocated among the total number of Temple members."³⁰ Yet, members were clothed, fed, and sheltered. Life in the Temple could be difficult, but it was stable and people's basic needs were met. That \$12,000 in November 1978 would be worth \$43,712 in August 2017. As mentioned earlier, in the United States today roughly half the population makes less than \$30,000 each year. Temple members, if they were given an equal share of assets, would be wealthier than the majority of their fellow Americans today.

As income inequality continues to grow and wealth inequality expands exponentially across the globe, survival for those who lack the opportunities or skills to work in jobs that pay a living wage can look to organizations like Peoples Temple for ideas about how to organize communally and perhaps utilize an ideology such as apostolic socialism to keep the community bound together and moving toward a similar goal. Organizing within a religious framework also allows groups to take advantage of legal options that nonprofit and religious organizations can employ to multiply the advantages of communal living. Despite the fact that the Temple enriched itself by legal means, it also offers a model of communal living that can be adapted to meet people's basic needs within

a nonprofit framework. Buying food in bulk, reduced individual tax burdens, and a smaller housing footprint contribute to cost and ecological savings. In the case of Peoples Temple, members' dedication to the cause certainly helped them to maintain stable lives, met their needs, and gave dignity to the poor around them while increasing the aforementioned systematic advantages. If nothing else, this is a legacy that should not be swept away by the tragedy at Jonestown.

Furthermore, we should ask why the idea of leveraging existing laws to enable people to live stable, healthy lives in a dedicated community strikes readers as unethical or questionable. Although it is not a main argument of this article, popular reactions to communal religious groups invite us to reflect on our assumptions about what constitutes religion and raise an important theoretical question with legal implications: What is our operating definition of a religious group and how does it relate to existing state definitions of economic power? That is, when religions cross over into other ideological categories such as "the family," and its related domain, "the household," we start seeing how economic structures shape religious organizations not just within a state's purview, but also within our theoretical constructs of what can actually constitute a "religion." Peoples Temple and other religious communal groups stand as empirical challenges to such definitions. As inequality expands and more people have to face difficult questions between having a home or having food, religious organizations offer both the ideological and economic foundations for solving these basic human problems should people choose to live communally.

RACE, RACISM, AND PEOPLES TEMPLE

Even before it arrived in California, Peoples Temple was practicing a program of racial integration built on Jones' borrowing from Pentecostal tradition and his concept of a rainbow family that involved his wife, Marceline, and their biological and adopted children. The Temple's Indiana membership drew heavily on white Protestants, but even during this early period Jones was experimenting with faith healing and African American Pentecostal-style preaching, and drawing attention from local black pastors. During the 1950s and 1960s the Temple was open to black participation with pastor Archie Ijames being the most significant African American convert. Indeed, Ijames was included in the Temple leadership and was one of Jones' associate pastors who moved to California. His presence among the Temple's leadership is also an exception that proves the rule—Peoples Temple was led predominantly by a group of educated white women, and a smaller number of white men, who joined the group during the Redwood Valley era. This group would remain in leadership even after missions to Los Angeles

and San Francisco expanded the Temple membership exponentially with African American members. Indeed, according to Maaga, “The mostly female leadership of Jonestown was drawn primarily from the California white professional group with important support from the Indiana members. The rank and file were almost exclusively urban blacks of all ages and both genders.”³¹

The question of Temple leadership is one of the most difficult contradictions in Temple history. While Jones encouraged interracial relationships and fought for racial equality, Moore notes,

Jim’s assault on racism only went so far. He challenged its presence in American society, but was blind to its existence within his own organization. When Jim and his leadership group gave me the hard sell on Peoples Temple, I noticed only one black among the leaders. The people in power—the ones who ran the print shop, the media, the bus barn, the children’s homes, the nursing homes—were white, not black.³²

Hall argues that this racial imbalance of power was because

it seems to reflect previous racial stratification of life chances in the society that spawned Peoples Temple. A number of the Blacks who joined the Temple were virtually illiterate, and not many of the rest had any sort of professional experience in social work, publishing, graphics, public relations, law, or the other administrative, technical, and professional occupations that the Temple depended upon for its successful operation.³³

Though we should take Hall’s claims about virtual illiteracy among the Temple’s black membership with a grain of salt—not all black members were illiterate while some white members were—that does not explain why capable black members of the Temple were not also given leadership opportunities. We need to acknowledge that there was a direct contradiction between the Temple’s message of racial reconciliation and its almost exclusively white governance.³⁴ Power in the Temple was regulated from the top down and Jones preferred white women who were loyal to him in positions of authority. Temple management reflects a larger problem of the top-down, hierarchical authority structure in the church. Jones’ preferences were driving factors in the selection of leaders and that included an implicit racial bias. While racism infuriated Jones, he replicated racist institutional structures when selecting leaders.

Even if we accept that some members lacked skills that Hall identifies as being necessary for the church’s successful running, we cannot ignore the fact that the Temple was involved in educating members and even helped to pay for college for some. Although it specifically targeted African Americans who did not previously have the opportunity to gain an education by providing them with scholarships to community college, it did not then move them into leadership positions, at least not in the

United States. The pattern changed with the move to Jonestown, though not substantially. The “Eight Revolutionaries” specifically identified racial injustice in selecting leadership when they wrote

New white upper middle class folk seem to be trusted and treated better than black people who have proven their loyalties throughout the years. There’s never been one black person who’s [*sic*] come into People’s Temple and put on staff right away.³⁵

The letter notes one exception, Lee Ingram, but adds that it took him almost a year to move into a position of authority. Temple leadership was an open contradiction of the group’s stated mission and goals.

Despite the eventual structural contradictions between a professed interracial body of believers and an institutional organization that exhibited racial stratification, there seem to have been sincere attempts at racial reconciliation and integration in the Temple throughout its history. Certainly in the Indiana period, Jones’ desires to integrate the church led to him cutting ties with the Methodists and starting his own integrated church. His place on the Indianapolis Human Rights Commission certainly speaks to the work he was doing in the early 1960s to help integration efforts and the Temple’s role in fighting for social justice. Even after the move to California and the increasing focus on Jones, racial integration was a key component of Peoples Temple’s identity. Perusing pictures from the period it is apparent that people with different ancestries were living, loving, and working together for the cause. As the essays in *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America* make clear, people joined the Temple to offer services to all people or to receive them.³⁶ Peoples Temple met peoples’ needs. Drug addicts could get help. The hungry were fed. A chance at political activism was made possible—especially after the move to San Francisco when the church became a power player in San Francisco politics. The Temple met the needs of people who sought help and wanted a way to be more engaged. Yet, the ability of African Americans to rise to prominence within the Temple remains a real problem if one is to look at the Temple as having instituted something worth emulating.

There is a lesson to be learned from Peoples Temple in the difficulties and successes that members had in negotiating American racism in the 1950s–1970s. As a recent issue of the *Journal of Biblical Literature* has pointed out, the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM), which arose in response to slayings of African Americans by police officers from 2012–2014, draws our attention to the ongoing history of whitewashing the Bible and its interpretation.³⁷ Peoples Temple is an example of a group that predated BLM by more than a half century that also acknowledged racial violence and sought integration through an interpretation of scripture that dignified all bodies and drew heavily upon African

American Pentecostal traditions. It organized politically and worked for racial equality and real political transformation, especially in Indianapolis and San Francisco. Ultimately, despite the problems in leadership that emphasized voices from particular racial backgrounds, it was the life on the ground in the Temple that offers us the greatest lesson in combatting racial division in the United States. People lived next to each other, loved each other, and were encouraged to build a working community together. While institutional power was largely kept from black members, there was at least a daily life that was interracial, and members demonstrated that racial division can be overcome through a deliberate commitment that diminished racial boundaries by putting people in close contact. Combining this everyday life with the activities that caused the Temple's success with racial integration—caring for the poor and needy, continuing familiar religious practices such as singing and worship, and offering a chance at political relevance—provides aspiring religious organizers with a model for how to draw white and black people together into a powerful religious organization.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

If Peoples Temple was so great, why is it no longer with us? A simple answer is the mercurial force behind the Temple: Jim Jones. Blaming Jones is easy and has some validity. He was the leader, the focus of much Temple activity and energy, a man who demanded loyalty of the membership, and the visionary behind the group. Jones' manic energy and vision inspired people and drew them to making costly commitments to Peoples Temple. Some members moved across the country from Indianapolis to Redwood Valley in the early 1960s. Others turned their property over to the church for its work. Some lived in less comfortable settings than they would otherwise so that they could work for a vision that came from Jones first and was reaffirmed by leadership. Yet, there is a second, supporting aspect that I think underscores Peoples Temple's failure and that is the organizational structure which placed Jones at the top of the church with unchecked authority. That the group was also "strict" in Laurence Iannaccone's sense of demanding a lot of members' time, energy, and devotion to the cause is key to the Temple's successes and failure.³⁸ The vision of apostolic socialism, the way it was lived in an interracial communal system, and the ongoing attraction for new members lay in Jones and the way that he got people to commit. At its best, the Temple gave people a reason to come together and live better material lives with a strong spiritual purpose. Yet, the extreme methods of discipline, the spying that members conducted on each other, and the selection of a largely white leadership that was loyal to Jones, are also byproducts of Jones' charisma. Without instituting a series of checks and

balances within the organization to curb the power of any one individual, Peoples Temple was set up to run on the force of Jim Jones.

It worked, for a while. Yet, the group ended in violence in Jonestown. One explanation, among the many that scholars have provided to answer the question “Why?” comes from sociologists Tom Robbins, Dick Anthony, and Lorne Dawson. Their theories are important because they are generalized from different cases in which new religious movements either became violent or were violently attacked. They explain that three internal factors need to be present in order for a new religious movement to become violent. The group’s charismatic leadership has to become tenuous, the group has to be socially isolated, and they have to have the presence of apocalyptic beliefs. There also needs to be a perception (real or otherwise) of an external threat.³⁹ The deaths at Jonestown were the product of a group that had an apocalyptic view of the world being destroyed in nuclear war; the group also feared being destroyed by a capitalist system that hated it for abandoning the American economic system. Jones was increasingly paranoid about the government spying on him and betrayal from within, fears that were exacerbated by the increasing pressure from the Concerned Relatives for the IRS to examine Peoples Temple’s finances. Finally, the group isolated itself in Guyana away from any feedback that could have called Jones and its religious mission into question. Certainly that isolation started in the California period, with members dedicating an increasing amount of their time to Temple activities. With the move to Guyana, that isolation became total. The final impetus to the murder-suicides came from Congressman Leo Ryan’s visit and subsequent murder at the airstrip outside Jonestown. Claiming that the group would never be left alone, Jones called the members together to their deaths.⁴⁰

Dawson outlines six strategies that charismatic leaders can use to resist the “routinization of charisma” that ultimately leads to them losing direct control over the group (although it is necessary if the group is to survive the leader’s death): they can alter the group’s doctrines or policies, seek constant affirmations of commitment, demonize opponents, stifle dissent, demand loyalty to the group primarily, and change the group’s location.⁴¹ Throughout Peoples Temple’s history Jones undertook all of these strategies. He added new doctrines, such as ideas about reincarnation and revolutionary suicide, to the group’s Christian foundations. The Planning Commission’s forced confessions and violent disciplinary practices elicited displays of loyalty, stifled dissent, built loyalty to the group, and helped demonize opponents. The suicide rehearsals that prepared people for taking the poison at Jonestown also emphasized commitment and loyalty to Jones and to the community’s ideals. Jones vilified his critics, especially the United States government, as threatening the socialist utopia that Peoples Temple was trying to construct. Building Jonestown and having members relocate there is the

foremost example of removing a group and isolating it from negative feedback, but we should also remember that there was precedent for this in the initial move to Redwood Valley which removed Peoples Temple members from a hostile racial climate in Indianapolis. These strategies constantly disrupted any nascent efforts within Peoples Temple to wrest control from Jones. In hindsight, however, we can learn a pattern of which any organization should be wary. Allowing one individual to have a monopoly (or near monopoly) on power can result in a precarious situation that may lead to devastating institutional results and even more disastrous personal consequences. The psychologist Archie Smith Jr. has usefully illustrated the process by which Jones and the members of Peoples Temple were engaged in crafting his charismatic authority over the decades through his concept of “audience corruption.” Smith describes this process as “a communicative or interactive process between the leader and his followers. Followers learn to give the responses the leader wants them to learn; they feed them back to the leader on cue. He in turn believes even more in the power of the rightness of his leadership.”⁴² Jones’ authority developed over time as he put forth the idea that he was God and his congregation responded in kind. There was a feedback loop and dissenting voices were removed from the group. This behavior is dangerous for a group’s stability as it leads to social encapsulation and enables extreme ideas to become normal for people within an organization.

If we want to learn from Peoples Temple, one of the best lessons would be to diffuse power throughout an organization and accept critical feedback from outside sources. There are a lot of relevant “what if” questions about Peoples Temple if we take out the choice to develop the settlement at Jonestown and eventually to relocate almost 1,000 people there permanently (more than 1,000 members spent at least some time in Jonestown). What if Jones had died in the United States of natural causes? How would the leadership vacuum have been filled? What would have been the effect on the membership? What if there had been a more robust leadership group that was elected by the membership through democratic processes as opposed to being appointed by Jones? What if there was a more diverse leadership group that represented a wider constituency and answered to the membership? What if Temple members did not have to fear violence and shame for running afoul of Jones and his inner circle? What if the IRS had started investigating the Temple’s finances earlier and decided that the group’s tax situation was noncompliant? These questions are speculative and most of them reference problems that other groups have undergone when transitioning to a second generation of leadership. A Temple management style that regularly rotated members and promoted people from a variety of backgrounds and that was beholden to membership might have served as a buffer against Jones’ more narcissistic and sadistic qualities. It also

might have enabled more critical voices to enter into group discussion and, as such, diminish the power and charisma Jones possessed. That, however, is speculation. Jones was very good at manipulating people and his faith healing, message, and preaching were put front and center in the Temple's promotional material. Jim Jones was the reason to come and join Peoples Temple. While the group's goals and ideas are invaluable, for Peoples Temple members those concepts and vision were rooted in Jones. We cannot get around that, but we can learn from it. There is no reason why part of Peoples Temple's legacy cannot inspire other experiments in communal living and racial reconciliation without including Jones' prophecies about the end of the world and his constant demands for loyalty.

CONCLUSION

In 2016 I observed that we should move from a social problems paradigm for assessing new religions to a social possibilities paradigm. By that I meant that we should focus on what worked within groups that are seen as "problems" so that people are defined by their lives and spiritual pursuits rather than by how outsiders explain the significance of their deaths. Although I was writing about historian Benjamin Zeller's approach to Heaven's Gate, the theory of defining a group by its spiritual pursuits, rather than its end applies to Peoples Temple as well.⁴³ We see in Peoples Temple members' spiritual pursuits attempts to put apostolic socialism into practice. We should never let the dark legacy of Jonestown and the destructive aspects of Jones' personality eclipse these important goals people held.

I also argued that new religious movements are significant because they are experiments in answering the question "How then should we live?" and that the lives of people who join these movements are answers to that question. As such, they present us with social possibilities, not problems.⁴⁴ Peoples Temple had its problems. It had a hierarchy that, if not racist in intent, still consolidated power in white bodies that were educated and that reinforced racialized class standards that the group was ostensibly trying to overcome. It used vicious corporal punishment to discipline people. There is good reason to think that sexual relationships with Jim Jones were required to move up in the Temple. Finally, Jones himself, with his increasing paranoia and his own sense of himself as God, led to instability; the loyalty that the group had fostered in Jones and the belief in his powers bolstered his charismatic status within the group to the point that he was able to convince some people to engage in murder and suicide on 18 November 1978.⁴⁵

But the Temple also had its possibilities and those possibilities seem increasingly relevant. First, apostolic socialism and the communal living

standards it inspired are the kinds of religious innovations that groups within the United States may want to adopt if we continue to see the gap between rich and poor grow. As the Western world's demographics also shift older, the Temple's senior citizens ministry, which gave the church its housing infrastructure and also provided quality care for senior citizens, may be a way to support the elderly and provide the housing and meaningful labor that people need.

Attempts to create a racially egalitarian community are also important. While the Temple had mixed results when it came to bridging the racial divide—it had a large African American base with white leadership at the top—it did at least succeed in bringing together people of all colors at a time of great racial tension in the United States. That the church was already integrating while it was in Indiana in the 1950s is a testimony to Jones' foresight on the importance of uniting the races in principle if not in fact. The Temple's interracial nature is not widely circulated in most narratives about Jonestown and that limits people's ability to identify Peoples Temple as a source for insight and inspiration. The rainbow community that people tried to build is ultimately erased by the perception of a white leader guiding his predominantly black followers to their deaths. As scholars, we should challenge this stereotype because doing so draws attention to the hard work, accomplishments, and motivations of Peoples Temple's members. Ultimately, the Temple was able to inspire white and black people to live together in close proximity, a major accomplishment in the United States where, forty years later, residential patterns remain segregated.

On the fortieth anniversary of Jonestown, it is worth revisiting the long history of Peoples Temple. It is a lost legacy of successes and failures, but there are important ideas that address issues that affect millions of Americans today that are worth revisiting, at least in the Temple's homeland. If nothing else, we owe it to those who died at Jonestown and their families not to forget what they lived for and to weigh the value of their ideas and actions in light of concerns other than what led to their violent end in Guyana when we revisit the topic of Jonestown. If we really want to understand Peoples Temple and Jonestown, we have to understand this lost legacy. Without such comprehension, we cannot see how choices that Jones, his surrogates, and the Temple's opponents made ultimately directed the fateful decisions of 18 November 1978. Without the persistent sense that the group's socialist ideology and lifestyle was in peril, Jonestown would have never been started. The legacy of people who lived with apostolic socialism and its effects is something that has to be emphasized against the narratives of blind sheep being led to slaughter by a charismatic madman. There is much that is worth seriously revisiting and considering in the Temple's legacy that can engage the minds of contemporary problem solvers. Those ideas and experiments should be every bit a part of the Temple's legacy.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Rebecca Moore, "Is the Canon on Jonestown Closed?" *Nova Religio* 4, no. 1 (2000): 7–27.
- ² Statistics taken from Social Security Online, "Wage Statistics for 2016," at <https://www.ssa.gov/cgi-bin/netcomp.cgi?year=2016>, accessed 22 December 2017.
- ³ I draw extensively from the work of John R. Hall and Rebecca Moore who are the two leading scholars of Peoples Temple; their overviews of the Temple and its history should be standard reference material for anybody looking to familiarize themselves with the organization. John R. Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land: Jonestown in American Cultural History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1987); Rebecca Moore, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2009). See also Mary McCormick Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown*, with a foreword by Catherine Wessinger (Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998).
- ⁴ Annotated transcript Q10592, "Two Sermons," Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=27331, last modified 18 February 2016.
- ⁵ Annotated transcript Q1023, "San Francisco sermon (early 1970s)," Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=63230, last modified 22 April 2015. See also, Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown*, 8–9.
- ⁶ David Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide: Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown*, foreword by Catherine L. Albanese and Stephen J. Stein (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003).
- ⁷ Annotated transcript Q1059-3, "Two Sermons (first dated 12 June 1972; second dated 20 October 1973)," Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=63560, last modified 21 April 2015.
- ⁸ Annotated transcript Q960, "Jones expresses defiance in 1973 sermons," Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=27628, last modified 16 March 2017, emphasis in original.
- ⁹ Annotated transcript Q1059-3, "Two Sermons (first dated 12 June 1972; second dated 20 October 1973)."
- ¹⁰ Annotated transcript Q960, "Jones expresses defiance in 1973 sermons," emphasis in original.
- ¹¹ Catherine Abbott, "Communism, Marxism, and Socialism: Radical Politics and Jim Jones," *the jonestown report* 17 (November 2005), http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=64856.
- ¹² Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown*, 74–86.
- ¹³ Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown*, 78.
- ¹⁴ John Biddulph, Walter Wayne Pietila, Vera Biddulph, Mickey Touchette, Hulena M. Flowers, Tom Podgorski, Terri Pietela, Jim Cobb, "Eight Revolutionaries" letter, n.d., Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and

Peoples Temple, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=14075, last modified 30 April 2015.

¹⁵ “The Eight Revolutionaries,” punctuation and spelling as in the original.

¹⁶ See e.g., Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide*; Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land*; Moore, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple*; Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown*; Judith Mary Weightman, *Making Sense of the Jonestown Suicides: A Sociological History of Peoples Temple* (New York and Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983).

¹⁷ This can be seen in Holly Folk’s article on “Divine Materiality” in this issue.

¹⁸ Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown*, 15.

¹⁹ “A True Follower of This Activist Christian Ministry (Ukiah and Redwood Valley, California 1965–1974),” *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/02-05-TrueActivist.pdf>, accessed 11 September 2017.

²⁰ Some individuals view the use of corporal punishment on children and adults in a church setting by responsible adults or in the home by parents, as an essential component for building a good society. Living in the American South as I do, I hear from my students and other members of the community that the corporal discipline that occurred in Peoples Temple would be embraced by some. The sexual humiliation, however, would not be accepted.

²¹ Moore, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, 28.

²² See e.g., Timothy Miller, *The Quest for Utopia in Twentieth-Century America*, vol. 1, 1900–1960 (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998); Timothy Miller, *The 60s Communes: Hippies and Beyond* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999).

²³ Miller, *The 60s Communes*, 102.

²⁴ “U.S. Addresses for People Emigrating to Guyana,” archived at *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/PTaddressesinUS.pdf>, accessed 9 December 2017. I arrived at my estimates by counting any address that contained three or more members who had at least two different last names. This was to eliminate the possibility of single-family household units that contained people who were not married to each other, but who may have been cohabiting. In some cases, there was sufficient reason to guess that there was a grandparent or parent and child relationship in the home, even though there were different last names. These units were excluded because they may have been single families. Although the document also contains Los Angeles addresses, only San Francisco residences were counted to keep consistency with Miller’s numbers that refer only to San Francisco.

²⁵ Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land*, 82.

²⁶ Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land*, 91.

²⁷ Rebecca Moore, *A Sympathetic History of Jonestown: The Moore Family Involvement in Peoples Temple* (Lewiston/Queenston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1985), 85.

²⁸ Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land*, 83.

²⁹ Marshall Kilduff and Paul Tracy, “Inside Peoples Temple,” *New West* (1977), archived at *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/newWestart.pdf>, accessed 15 September 2017. The Concerned Relatives were the anticult

organization comprised of former members, relatives, and other detractors who openly criticized the Temple and mobilized against it.

³⁰ Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land*, 90.

³¹ Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown*, 10.

³² Moore, *In Defense of Peoples Temple and Other Essays* (Lewiston/Queenston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1988), 117.

³³ Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land*, 96.

³⁴ Rebecca Moore, "An Update on the Demographics of Jonestown," *the jonestown teport*, vol. 19 (November 2017), http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=70495.

³⁵ "Letter from Eight Revolutionaries."

³⁶ Rebecca Moore, Anthony B. Pinn, and Mary R. Sawyer, eds., *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

³⁷ See the articles in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* (136, no. 1 [2017]) forum "The *JBL* Forum, an Occasional Exchange: Black Lives Matter for Critical Biblical Scholarship": Wil Gafney, "A Reflection on Black Lives Matter and Its Impact on My Scholarship," 204–207; Nyasha Junior, "The Scholarly Network," 208–212; Kenneth Ngwa, "At Exodus as the Door of (No) Return," 213–220; Richard Newton, "The African American Bible: Bound in a Christian Nation," 221–228; Bernadette J. Brooten, "Research on the New Testament and Early Christian Literature May Assist the Churches in Setting Ethical Priorities," 229–236; Tat-Siong Benny Liew, "Black Scholarship Matters," 237–244. The Temple should also be seen as an experiment in racial integration before, during, and after the Civil Rights Movement's peak and can be constructively studied beside the works of major theological thinkers from that era such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and James Cone. See also, Moore, Pinn, and Sawyer, *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America*.

³⁸ Laurence R. Iannaccone, "Why Strict Churches are Strong," *American Journal of Sociology* 99, no. 5 (March 1994): 1180–1211.

³⁹ Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony, "Sects and Violence: Factors Enhancing the Volatility of Marginal Religious Movements," in *Armageddon at Waco: Critical Perspectives on the Branch Davidian Conflict*, ed. Stuart A. Wright (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995): 236–259; Lorne Dawson, *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2006): 142–178.

⁴⁰ Regarding the particulars of the deaths at Jonestown, I tend to agree with John R. Hall and his associates that it was Congressman Leo Ryan's visit that pushed the group to enact revolutionary suicide. Without Ryan's visit, or in the theoretical model's language, an encounter with an outside threat, I do not think that Peoples Temple would have ended the way it did (John R. Hall, Philip D. Schuyler, and Sylvaine Trinh, *Apocalypse Observed: Religious Movements and Violence in North America, Europe, and Japan* [New York: Routledge, 2000]). There are other explanations for the deaths at Jonestown and see, in particular, David Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide*; Catherine Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven's Gate* (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2000). Both Chidester and Wessinger argue that the suicides were the products of the classificatory schemas and ultimate concerns of the members of Peoples

Temple. These arguments are important correctives to the narrative of brain-washing that can become prominent in explanations of Jonestown. Chidester's and Wessinger's arguments emphasize the autonomy of people who had spent years accepting and shaping the worldview Jones was affirming, and we should, therefore, see their actions as actions of engaged religious individuals living within a worldview who saw their deaths as a revolutionary act of defiance against the capitalist, racist American order.

⁴¹ Dawson, *Comprehending Cults*, 157–160.

⁴² Archie Smith, Jr., "We Need to Press Forward: Black Religion and Jonestown, Twenty Years Later," *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=16595, last modified 23 December 2014.

⁴³ David Feltmate, "Perspective: Rethinking New Religious Movements Beyond the Social Problems Paradigm," *Nova Religio* 20, no. 2 (2016): 82–96. See also Benjamin E. Zeller, *Heaven's Gate: America's UFO Religion*, Foreword by Robert W. Balch (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

⁴⁴ Feltmate, "Rethinking New Religious Movements," 95.

⁴⁵ I include both murder and suicide here since the question of whether the adults at Jonestown were murdered or committed suicide (and how many people should be classified under each category) is contested. Like many commentators, I consider the children at Jonestown to have been murdered, but the question as to whether the adults were murdered is controversial and without knowing people's motivations at that moment it is impossible to discern how many people should be classified as murdered or if they willfully committed suicide. For more debate, see "Was It Murder or Suicide: A Forum," *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=31981, last modified 5 March 2014.