

Jonestown, Forty Years On

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ABSTRACT: This introduction to a special issue of *Nova Religio* marking the fortieth anniversary of the deaths in Jonestown, Guyana, provides the background for the articles that follow. A brief history of Peoples Temple and discussion of the events in Jonestown precede an examination of the dominant narratives that have described this new religious movement. An analysis of popular narratives follows, utilizing Erving Goffman's frame theory and the classification system outlined by Anson Shupe and Jeffrey Hadden. A summary of the articles that appear in this issue notes the contributions that a new generation of scholars makes to reframing the story of Peoples Temple and Jonestown. By shifting attention from the deaths in Jonestown to the lives in Peoples Temple, they are enlarging the frame for understanding how and why new religions succeed or fail.

KEYWORDS: Peoples Temple, Jonestown, religious violence, new religious movements, frame theory

What more can be said about Peoples Temple and Jonestown after four decades? By my count, there are hundreds of articles, more than seventy-five books, ten podcasts, dozens of songs, mix-tapes, films, documentaries, and more. Yet, as the articles in this special issue of *Nova Religio* demonstrate, there is a great deal more to learn about this unparalleled religious movement. Over the years a number of assessments and reassessments have appeared, frequently coinciding with the anniversary of the deaths.¹ Analyses of the tragedy near Waco, Texas, involving the Branch Davidians, which occurred twenty-five years ago, created the opportunity to embark upon

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comparative studies of instances of violence and new religions.² All of these evaluations have greatly enlarged our understanding of new religions in general, and Peoples Temple in particular. But, traditional framing of “Jonestown”—as a place, an event, and a concept—has tended to exclude consideration of Peoples Temple. This is unfortunate, since as a new religious movement the Temple may be able to teach us something today. Looking at its successes, and not just its spectacular failure, provides some valuable lessons not only for scholars but for society at large.

This introduction sets the stage for the articles that follow by first providing a history of Peoples Temple and an account of the events in Jonestown.³ (This spares readers revisiting the story in each and every article in the issue.) I will look at the ways in which Jonestown has been considered in the past, relying not only on Erving Goffman’s frame theory by way of explanation, but also using the scheme outlined by Anson Shupe and Jeffrey Hadden in their investigation of news coverage of Waco. I will then discuss the ways the succeeding articles reframe our understanding of events by transferring the focus in their studies from the deaths in Jonestown to the lives of the members of Peoples Temple and their singular beliefs and accomplishments.

BACKGROUND

Peoples Temple began in Indianapolis in the 1950s under the leadership of a charismatic young white preacher, Jim Jones (1931–1978), and his wife Marceline Baldwin Jones (1927–1978). Marceline was an able nursing home administrator and Jim was a dynamic speaker with a strong commitment to racial integration. Together they attracted an interracial congregation that met at several different locations in the segregated city. Jones’ prophetic vision of a nuclear disaster, coupled with his desire to escape the increasing difficulties the church faced in Indianapolis, led him to relocate to northern California; eighty church members—white as well as African American—followed. They settled in Redwood Valley, in the California wine country, and initially shared services and programs with Christ Church of the Golden Rule in Willits. The two had similar aims: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, share resources, and live communally. But Jones’ efforts to take over the church failed, and the two groups parted acrimoniously.

Young white single adults joined the initial cohort of families in Redwood Valley and Ukiah. They constructed a church building and other facilities, and actively recruited new members. But the predominantly white rural area was not conducive to the goal of racial equality, so group members began traveling and proselytizing in San Francisco—even engaging in “sheep stealing” at some of the large black churches in

the Bay Area. San Francisco proved an excellent place to establish service programs to help the poor, the elderly, Vietnam veterans, and others who needed assistance in negotiating the welfare system. In addition, Jim Jones created a platform for addressing a variety of progressive causes—anticolonialism movements in Angola, protests against the dictatorship in Chile, demonstrations challenging racism at home. The dynamism of the movement spread to Los Angeles, and missionary efforts were made to enlarge group membership as it took trips across the United States.

[Full disclosure: My two sisters joined Peoples Temple at this time in the late 1960s and early 1970s. They were part of the leadership group and, in fact, helped plan the deaths. They too died in Jonestown, along with my nephew.]

Jones' theological development had its roots in Pentecostal Christianity, while his political ideology stemmed from Marxism, or so he said. It was certainly not a stance welcomed by the Communist Party USA. According to the sociologist John R. Hall, Jones radicalized Pentecostalism in two ways: first, by proclaiming his own divinity and (potentially) that of his followers; and second, by "pushing the 'holy rollers' out of their own matrix, ostensibly by carrying their legacy to its own (Christian) communalist conclusions."⁴ Jones' metamorphosis from prophet of God to God Almighty seemed to occur in the move from Indiana to California.⁵ By 1972, when the group transferred its headquarters from Redwood Valley to San Francisco, the Temple was affiliated with the mainline Disciples of Christ and offered a Social Gospel-style ministry. Yet its worship services retained elements of the Black Church tradition and appealed to a cross-section of African Americans in the city.⁶

In 1974 a few youthful members from the movement began clearing land for an agricultural project in the South American country of Guyana, near the Venezuelan border. Prompted by a number of factors—ranging from the political, such as the fiery denouement of the Symbionese Liberation Army, to the mundane, such as the possibility of losing its tax-exempt status as a church—the Temple sought a safe haven abroad. A group of young men and women who called themselves "The Pioneers" labored long and hard to clear the jungle, develop infrastructure, and construct housing for a new community. Though they had accomplished a great deal in a few years, they were not ready for the influx of hundreds of people in mid-1977 who immigrated to "The Promised Land" with high hopes in the wake of negative news stories about internal church practices.

Peoples Temple publicly appeared to be a progressive and socially-engaged organization in which racial integration and compassionate action were visible. Very disturbing practices, however, regularly occurred behind closed doors within the hierarchically structured

organization. Group “catharsis sessions” were held to mutually criticize and correct social and behavioral problems, either through corporal punishment or by verbal abuse. Jones required selected followers to have sex with him and maintained a cohort of young white females to service him. Miraculous cures effected during faith healing services were faked. Members turned over property, money, jewelry, and other items of value to the Temple, either through peer pressure or guilt, and were unable to recover them upon leaving. These were the primary charges made in 1977 and 1978 by an oppositional group called the Concerned Relatives.⁷

Following the mass migration to Jonestown, the Concerned Relatives increased the pressure by filing lawsuits against the Temple and its leaders, mobilizing government agencies to investigate, and, most importantly, maintaining a high media profile.⁸ Not only did they encourage California Congressman Leo J. Ryan (1925–1978) to investigate their charges, a number of Concerned Relatives traveled with him to Guyana.

Although life in Jonestown was primitive by comparison to middle-class American standards, provisions were adequate and certainly not life-threatening. Conditions seemed to deteriorate markedly in the summer of 1978, however. Jones created a siege mentality and ordered frequent “White Nights”—essentially civil defense drills—during which community members were roused from sleep and told they were under attack. The group also began to rehearse a ritual in which they drank what they were told was poison and waited to die. They discussed what they ought to do with their children, should they actually be attacked, and agreed they would “put them to sleep,” a euphemism for poisoning them.⁹

All of these factors—Concerned Relatives, government agents, and hostile journalists—generated fear and paranoia in Jonestown, and culminated in the visit of Congressman Ryan in November 1978.¹⁰ Clearly, a plan to commit mass murder and suicide had already been made: it only awaited the right moment for implementation. The arrival of the congressman, and his departure with a handful of defectors, set the plan in motion. While waiting to board two small airplanes that would take the delegation of relatives, journalists, and defectors to Georgetown, Ryan and three journalists were assassinated by Temple gunmen; a Jonestown resident attempting to leave was also killed in the attack. Others were seriously wounded. In Jonestown itself, residents circulated in confusion around a central pavilion where a vat of cyanide-laced punch was brought forward. Children were given the poison first, either by having it squirted into their mouths with syringes or taking it in paper cups. Adults did not begin to take the poison until the children were dead.¹¹

There is ongoing controversy as to whether we should call the deaths murder or suicide.¹² There is no question that the children—who were

too young to make a choice—were murdered. It is likely that many senior citizens were also murdered. The question that persists is whether the remaining adults voluntarily drank the poison. Although there were armed guards, they too died in the ritual. And, as the Guyana police commissioner who investigated the deaths asked me when I spoke with him in 1979: who would want to live after seeing their children die?¹³

These are the bare facts of the matter, but they do not tell the whole story. Who were these people? What were they doing, or attempting to do, by setting up an agricultural project outside of the United States? Why did they die? With so many unanswered questions in the wake of the tragedy, a number of different interest groups or stake holders have attempted to fill in the gaps and assemble the pieces into a coherent whole.

FRAMING JONESTOWN

In his influential book *Frame Theory*, social psychologist Erving Goffman (1922–1982) introduced the idea of frames, or “schemata of interpretation” that enable individuals—and groups—“to locate, perceive, identify, and label” occurrences within their lives and the wider world.¹⁴ Frames render events meaningful by organizing experiences and guiding actions. We are bombarded by random data all of the time. Frames allow us to assemble that information into a coherent package. Moreover, “an implicit function of framing is assigning causality or blame for a condition or event,” according to the sociologist Stuart Wright.¹⁵ Those identified as the guilty parties are then characterized as villains or enemies. As Wright concludes, framing assigns blame, imputes motives, identifies targets, and proposes strategies for future action.

We can see the framing process at work when we turn to the earliest accounts of what happened in Jonestown. I am utilizing the classification system developed by Anson Shupe and Jeffrey Hadden in their analysis of the tragedy that happened near Waco, Texas, in 1993.¹⁶ The conceptual frames identified by Shupe and Hadden for the Branch Davidians work well for analyzing the news stories published about Jonestown fifteen years earlier.

First, there is what they termed the public agent narrative. As the story is usually told in the case of Jonestown, this would describe Congressman Leo Ryan, whose heroic efforts to unmask the terrible conditions in the jungle community led to his murder. Ryan’s untimely death served to legitimate all of the claims ever made about Peoples Temple, regardless of their veracity. How can anyone criticize a federal official assassinated in the line of duty?

Although Shupe and Hadden called their next category the “Branch Davidian Narrative,” referring to the efforts made by David Koresh to get

his side of the story out to the public, we might more broadly call it the “New Religion Narrative” to refer to the point of view of members of the group. As a result of the events on 18 November 1978, most of those who might have presented the Peoples Temple narrative were dead. They did leave a massive number of documents, thousands of photographs, and more than 900 audiotapes. This wealth of material has allowed historians to examine the ways in which the members of Peoples Temple might have told their own story. But this information was not readily available in 1978. Moreover, that narrative was highly countercultural, defending a communal way of life that rejected materialism, individualism, racism, and classism. That storyline remains countercultural today.

Because three journalists were murdered along with the congressman, reporters had a vested interest in depicting Jonestown at its most horrifying. Thus, the frame devised by the mass media was not unbiased or neutral. Moreover, several reporters were wounded at the Port Kaituma airstrip, and provided dramatic first-person accounts (and two quickie paperbacks) about their experiences. But when journalists are part of the story, they lose the objective perspective we look for in our news.

Shupe and Hadden identified an anticult narrative at work in framing the Branch Davidian story. By the 1990s, a collection of groups dedicated to rescuing young adults from their religious commitments was well established. Indeed, anticult activists helped provoke the Branch Davidian encounter, according to both law enforcement officials and scholars.¹⁷ In the 1970s, however, the cult awareness movement was still in its infancy.

In the case of Peoples Temple, I would simply rename the anticult frame as an apostate frame—that is, the frame created by outspoken opponents of Peoples Temple. As the terrible news trickled out, most of the people who spoke to the press about the Temple had left the group long before Jonestown. They had raised alarms earlier so reporters knew them. A number of relatives had traveled to Guyana with the congressman and his party, and were also available to the media. Thus, the story of Jonestown was framed by former members who were critical of the organization.

Shupe and Hadden concluded with what they called a contrarian narrative—a less controversial term than “conspiracy theories.” Whatever we call them, within weeks of the deaths, a number of non-mainstream ideas were circulating: a neutron bomb had killed everyone; it was a CIA mind control experiment; United States forces killed people in Jonestown in order to use their bodies to smuggle heroin into the county. In 1979 an organization sponsored by the Church of Scientology (Alliance for the Preservation of Religious Liberty) began to circulate reports that a CIA agent had been present in Jonestown at the time of the deaths. These and other contrarian narratives relating to Jonestown have gained traction, thanks to the internet.¹⁸

REFRAMING THE NARRATIVE BY SHIFTING THE FOCUS TO PEOPLES TEMPLE

These are the primary ways the story of Jonestown has been outlined. We have the facts that specific interest groups find worthy—namely, the dramatic events of the movement’s last days. Missing almost entirely is an account of Peoples Temple: what was it? how did it function? what did members believe? These kinds of factual questions fall outside existing frameworks, which tend toward speculation, and, as Wright has argued, impute motives and assign blame. The articles that follow, however, challenge traditional narratives about Jonestown by enlarging the frame to include Peoples Temple. Thus, the group is not defined entirely by its death, but by its life as well. The authors have benefitted from the work of prior scholars, along with the treasury of resources accessible through the digital archive *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple*.¹⁹ At the same time, they have brought to light a wealth of information hitherto unexplored. We could say that it was hiding in plain sight: what was needed to find it was a willingness to depart from existing frameworks that concentrated primarily on the sensational and neglected the mundane. The articles that follow, therefore, scrutinize the life of Peoples Temple and its members, rather than their deaths.

Holly Folk’s examination of “divine materiality” illuminates the metaphysical aspects of Temple theology. Although the Temple has been studied from the perspective of black religion in America,²⁰ its metaphysical underpinnings have been neglected. Folk demonstrates the ways in which belief in incarnation—the enfleshment of the divine—and reincarnation—the belief in transmigration of souls—influenced both Jim Jones and his followers. The incarnational outlook of “god in a body” emphasized the immanence of the divine in everyday activities in the person of Jim Jones. It also provided the justification and model for self-sacrifice and devotion to apostolic socialism—the guiding principle of unselfish love enacted through sharing material goods and services that was promoted by Jones. Reincarnation, in contrast, offered a cosmic theodicy that explained the injustice that existed in the world. It also relativized racial differences by positing a white (or black) prior existence. Folk enriches our understanding of what she calls the “experiential pluralism” that existed in the movement by relying on first-person interviews she conducted with former Temple members. She concludes by locating the group within a category of a “Christian heterodoxy” that characterizes a number of Christian new religions today.

Scholars in the field of new religions studies have long assumed that Peoples Temple was a new religious movement, but how did the group see itself? Kristian Klippenstein investigates the Temple’s self-understanding as a “new religious movement”; in doing so, he interrogates the very

construct of new religions studies. Utilizing Stephen Kent's concept of spiritual kinship lineage,²¹ Klippenstein observes that the Temple's "spiritual lineage" drew from the Social Gospel movement and Black Church traditions. But it claimed kinship with nonreligious movements, such as socialism, and with what the public considered "illegitimate" movements, such as other new religions, as well. Klippenstein also uses Doug McAdam's social movement theory to identify the ways in which Peoples Temple capitalized on "political opportunities," "indigenous organizational strength," and "cognitive liberation" to mobilize members of the group. The case of Peoples Temple offers him the opportunity to explore each element of the scholarly term "new," "religious," "movement."

Heather Shearer studies the Temple's effective bureaucracy through the lens of activity theory, a framework for probing goal-directed human labor. Adopting David Feltmate's "social possibilities paradigm,"²² Shearer surveys the means by which Temple members were able to organize the mass migration of a thousand people from the United States to Guyana. Using memos, letters, forms, questionnaires, and other "homely" texts generated by the Temple, she reveals the means by which the group successfully accomplished its goals. Shearer's close reading of these "textual tools" unveils the ways that members were able to reinvent themselves in the Promised Land. An efficient bureaucracy, rather than brainwashing, created a new outlook among Temple members.

The final two articles review the legacy of Peoples Temple and Jonestown today. Sarah Crockford looks at how popular culture has appropriated the symbols of charismatic leadership, geographic and social isolation, and consuming poison—that is, "drinking the Kool-Aid"—through a process of mimesis, as delineated by Michael Taussig.²³ This activity has the effect of essentializing all purported cults under the Jonestown model, allows society to apportion blame, to learn lessons, and to act as a warning about the dangers of new and minority religions. Crockford examines movies, books, websites, and television programs about Peoples Temple to test these theories against the backdrop of her ethnographic observations of a martial arts school in Sedona, Arizona. She finds that her informants routinely understood the Temple as signifying (dangerous) charisma, isolation, and poison—a perilous combination. As Crockford notes, the mimetic process that occurs in popular culture does not simply describe new religions, but in fact constructs and essentializes them as inherently dangerous and threatening.

David Feltmate argues that revisiting the Temple's goals of apostolic socialism and racial reconciliation may prove fruitful for addressing contemporary social problems. Focusing on the communal lifestyle of its members and their attempt to practice racial integration on a daily basis, Feltmate observes that this legacy has been untapped. He finds

that the philosophy of apostolic socialism, in which goods and labor are shared among all, offers one route to resolve current income inequality. He reports, for example, that the \$12,000 income Temple members received in goods and services in 1977 would total \$43,712 in today's economy. The fact that African Americans and whites lived and worked together in common cause is also worth examining. Feltmate examines how institutional weaknesses led to the disaster in Jonestown and suggests some safeguards against similar tragedies. Nevertheless, he concludes that the social possibilities inherent in the Temple's communalism and commitment to racial equality remain unexplored opportunities.

Lynn Neal's media review of Jonestown on television deepens our understanding of the ways in which popular media have framed the Jonestown story. Bill Nichols, a leading authority on documentary filmmaking, writes that, "History does not repeat itself, except in mediated transformations such as memory, representation, reenactment, or fantasy."²⁴ By this he means that the repetition of the dominant narratives comes to make up history. Neal dissects some of the representations that have undoubtedly done more to shape popular opinion about Jonestown than anything scholars have written.

In addition to these notable analyses, this issue publishes an extended revision of a paper I gave at the 2017 American Academy of Religion on the ways in which Jonestown is used as shorthand for the danger attributed to all new religions. Drawing upon Godwin's Law—which states that "as an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison to Nazis or Hitler approaches one"²⁵—my perspective essay develops "Jones' Corollary": Discussions of new religions inevitably begin with a comparison to Jonestown. The essay argues that using extreme cases to consider minority religions, or to make public policy decisions, is both unwarranted and dangerous.

CONCLUSIONS

Early narratives framed Jonestown as a morality play pitting evil against good, and a tract on the dangers of religious fanaticism, concentrating on the maniacal and all-controlling cult leader and his brainwashed followers. These frames continue to shape popular conceptions about Jonestown, while ignoring the lessons that Peoples Temple might offer. A new cohort of researchers, however, has created entirely new narratives based upon the following questions: What did Peoples Temple members actually believe? Did they see the Temple as a new religious movement? What organizational lessons might be learned from the group's procedures? How is Jonestown used as a cultural symbol? Could we alleviate current social problems by judiciously adopting certain practices utilized in Peoples Temple? By focusing on

the Temple, rather than on Jonestown, these researchers have opened new vistas upon this particular group, and upon other new religions. What would it mean for society and our hope for the common good if academics and popular writers expanded existing frameworks to encompass not only the social problems but also the social possibilities that exist in any number of religious groups?

I am grateful that this new generation of scholars—most of whom were either very young or not yet born in 1978—has taken up the task of reconsidering Peoples Temple. The historical record about Peoples Temple continues to evolve, thanks to their remarkable contributions.

ENDNOTES

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