



Jim Jones, Jonestown, and the Peoples Temple of the Disciples of Christ

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Summary of movement

Peoples Temple (sometimes spelt People's Temple) was a new religious movement founded by Jim Jones. At the peak of its membership, it had around 5000 members across a number of churches in California. Whilst it began as a Christian movement, drawing on elements of Pentecostalism and the social and multiracial equality of liberal Protestant denominations, Jones turned against traditional Christianity over time, arguing that it had kept people enslaved. Instead, he preached a form of 'apostolic socialism', his own interpretation of communism, teaching his followers the importance of allegiance to the community.

In the late 1970s, Jones and members moved to the jungle of Guyana to establish an agricultural project which became known as Jonestown. The movement is infamous for the events which unfolded there in November 1978: the murder of a US congressman and four other people, followed by the mass murder and suicide of over 900 residents of Jonestown, a third of them children under 18. The word Jonestown has become synonymous with utopian millennial movements and violence.

History/Origins

Peoples Temple was founded by James (known as Jim) Warren Jones (1931-1978). Jones first established a church, called 'Community Unity Church', in his hometown of Indianapolis, Indiana in 1954. This became 'Wings of Deliverance' in 1955 and 'Peoples Temple' in 1956. In 1960, Peoples Temple affiliated to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and, in 1964, Jones was ordained a minister. By the late 1970s, Peoples Temple was the largest congregation within this denomination, with three churches in California. Jones' commitment to multiracial equality meant that congregations were racially mixed from the beginning, with roughly equal numbers of African American and Caucasian members.

Following the group's move to California in 1965, Jones was able to attract young, college-educated white people involved in the progressive political scene. Many of these young people were involved in the Civil

Rights movement and Anti-Vietnam War protests. These political youths, particularly the women, would become the Peoples Temple leaders in Jonestown. This group complemented the relatively poor African American and white working-class families which comprised the pre-existing congregation.

The Peoples Temple in California grew to offer numerous free services including health care checks and childcare as well as establishing care homes for the elderly and mentally ill which made a small profit for the movement. Scholar of religion John R. Hall writes that Peoples Temple was 'an activist religious social movement committed to racial integration, social and economic justice, peace and other progressive and radical political causes' (1995, 305). By the early 1970s, Peoples Temple was a significant political force in the left-liberal scene in California.

A silent video clip of Peoples Temple congregation, possibly 1972-1974 can be seen at https://archive.org/details/chi_000108

While there is no sound, the video captures the diversity of the congregation and how packed the church was.

In 1974, Peoples Temple began to negotiate with the government of Guyana to develop a 4000-acre site near the Venezuelan border: the official lease for the land was signed in 1976. Officially called the Peoples Temple Agricultural Project, the community became known as Jonestown. Members moved there over the course of 1977, partly to escape the racism that some were experiencing in America from far-right individuals and groups. Guyana was chosen because it was an English-speaking and yet multi-racial country, with a black minority government which espoused socialist ideals. By the end of 1977, there were around 1000 residents, the majority of them African Americans. Over 900 of the residents died on 18 November 1978.

In December 1978, lawyers for the Peoples Temple filed for bankruptcy and, in January 1979, the San Francisco Superior Court agreed to its dissolution. The Peoples Temple was formally terminated as a non-profit corporation in November 1983.

Beliefs

Jones was influenced by his mother's beliefs and childhood exposure to a variety of Protestant churches. However, his theology was largely self-styled, incorporating elements of Pentecostalism (including the gifts of the spirit such as healing and discernment – calling on the Holy Spirit to give direction on a matter), and social and multiracial equality (influenced by the social gospel of liberal Protestant denominations). Jones also incorporated themes prevalent in African American churches such as 'liberation, freedom, justice, and judgment' (Moore 2012).

Jones was particularly influenced by the teachings of the black minister, Father M. J. Divine, who had established a religious and economic community in Philadelphia, called the Peace Mission, which Jones visited numerous times before Father Divine's death in 1965. Scholars (Hall 1995, Wessinger 2000, Moore 2012) suggest that some of Jones' key teachings were influenced by Father Divine, including the desire to establish an agricultural community, referred to as 'the Promised Land,' and describing church members

as an extended family with himself as 'Father' or 'Dad.'

Jones had been attending communist meetings and rallies since the early 1950s. These influences became more pronounced in his theology over time. From the early 1970s, he denounced 'traditional Christianity,' its 'Sky God,' and the Bible, claiming that it had kept people enslaved. He taught an alternative view of God as 'Divine Principle,' in which the Principle was Love and Love was Socialism (Wessinger 2000, 37). In his teaching of 'Apostolic Socialism,' he stressed that members should live as the early Christian community described in the New Testament book of Acts of the Apostles, holding all things in common, and everyone receiving according to their needs. The ideal was always to create this community in a 'Promised Land' in the belief that Peoples Temple could not survive in the Babylon of the USA (Hall 1995, 306). In keeping with his socialist views, one of Jones' key teachings was commitment to the community of Peoples Temple and the importance of the group over the individual. Members were tested on their commitment to the community and to Jones himself, including through the practice of suicide drills.

Jones was revered as a charismatic preacher and as a [prophet](#), if not as God himself, by his followers. He taught that he was 'a manifestation of the Christ Principle', a saviour or messiah sent by God to teach Socialism. He claimed psychic abilities as well as powers of prophesy and healing (including claims of raising the dead). Even before founding Peoples Temple, he was known as a healer within the revival circuit. The leading scholar of such millenarian movements, Catherine Wessinger, claims that he staged healings, with the help of accomplices. She argues that Jones believed that this increased people's faith which, in turn, increased healings and led to donations to the Church (2000, 32). Jones' mission, writes Wessinger, was to 'teach others how to become gods like himself, complete manifestations of Socialism' (2000, 37), whilst Hall describes Jones as a 'self-styled visionary prophet' (1995, 303).

Millennial Beliefs

Peoples Temple can be described as an apocalyptic and millennial movement. Wessinger describes it as a 'fragile millennial group' in her tri-part typology, in which violence stemmed from a combination of internal pressures and external opposition, destabilising the group (2000, 18). In fragile millennial groups, including Jonestown, members sometimes commit violence because they 'perceive their millennial goal...as failing' (2000, 19). Jones taught that there would be an imminent apocalypse brought about through nuclear war and/or through a genocide of black people perpetrated by the American government (a date Jones once [prophesised](#) for 1967). He taught that American capitalist culture was irredeemably corrupt and would be destroyed. Communists, including the USSR, China and Cuba, as well as members of the Peoples Temple, would survive to 'establish the perfect communist society' (Wessinger 2000, 33).

Even before Jonestown was founded as an alternative to the evils of capitalist society, Jones had moved his family from Indiana to Brazil for a number of years in the 1960s because of racism and fears of a nuclear attack in North America. According to scholars (Wessinger 2000, Moore 2012), he chose Belo Horizonte, Brazil, as it was one of the places listed in the January 1962 issue of *Esquire Magazine* which included a feature on the safest places to be in case of nuclear attack. On his return to North America in 1965, he

selected another location from that list: Redwood Valley, California.

Fears of attack and the possibility of creating alternative lives in 'safe spaces' was a recurring theme of Peoples Temple. During the Jonestown years, Jones and leaders talked about the possibility of moving the community to the Soviet Union or to Cuba, considered ideal socialist states in contrast to the evils of capitalist America. Russian language lessons were taught during the evenings in Jonestown with this possibility in mind. However, when dissenters asked Jones if relocation could be an alternative to suicide, they were told that this was no longer an option (Wessinger 2000, 50).

Over the years, out of an unlikely amalgamation of disparate ideas and practices, Jones forged the mantle of a prophet who foresaw capitalist apocalypse and worked to establish a promised land for those who heeded his message. (Hall 1995, 304).

The creation of any self-sufficient commune is driven partly by utopian vision and Jonestown was no different: Peoples Temple members in North America initially referred to it as the 'Promised Land.'

We were fully engaged in speeding toward a glorious future in which we would make the difference. We would change the world, we were sure of it. Talk about being empowered! We were sure that, together, we could do anything. And when Jim said, as he often did, that one day the members of his church would dwindle to the number that originally met in his garage in Indianapolis, it was my only desire (wasn't it everybody's?) to be one of them. (Kathryn [Tropp] Barbour, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=31904).

Both pushes and pulls can be considered to have played a role in the creation of Jonestown. Guyana was chosen partly because it described itself as a multiracial, socialist republic, fitting with some of Jones' own ideologies, and Jones and his followers considered themselves to be fleeing a racist and oppressive society.

But they were also fleeing numerous lawsuits against Peoples Temple, including child custody cases, and a financial investigation by the Internal Revenue Service. An organisation called The Concerned Relatives, consisting of both critical relatives and disaffected former members, was becoming more successful in gaining the attention of media and politicians. This increased Jones' and his followers' sense of personal persecution. All of these factors contributed to the eventual violence that ensued at Jonestown.

Practices

During the Indiana and California years, members primarily attended Pentecostal-style church services. These were led by Jones in which he would preach and perform healings and [prophesies](#). Music was also a major feature of these services. Songs performed by the choir included hymns, African American spiritual songs and popular songs of the civil rights era, and a few of their own compositions. Peoples Temple released one album, *He's Able*, in 1973 (Brackett 2012). Music continued to be important to the

community after the move to Guyana.

The album can be listened to below:

From 1965, members began to practice communal living in California. All money was pooled: members donated their pay checks or social security payments in return for room and board. Members also attended 'corrective fellowship' meetings in which self-criticism was encouraged. Typical 'transgressions' included discourtesy to an elder, alcohol or drug use and petty crime.

Over time, the practice of corrective fellowship evolved into 'catharsis' meetings which 'required public confession and communal punishment for transgressions against the community and its members' (Moore 2009, 32-33). Corporal punishment of both adults and children was practiced. Punishments of adults at Jonestown also included the use of sedative drugs and confinement in small spaces (Wessinger 2000, 43).

These meetings were a means of demonstrating loyalty to Jones and to the group. The meetings were considered as a 're-training' away from the egotistic and individualist concerns of a capitalist society (Moore 2012).

In Jonestown, all members lived in the commune (apart from one family living in a house in Georgetown). Scholar of religion Rebecca Moore (2012) states that life in Jonestown was hard work - first clearing the jungle and then creating a self-sufficient community maintaining 1000 people. Residents worked 11-hour days, six days a week on farming, construction, maintenance, cooking, laundry, childcare, education, and healthcare, and made items to sell in Georgetown, Guyana's capital. Diet was simple and sometimes sparse, consisting mostly of beans and rice.

Members' lives in Jonestown were tightly controlled by Jones and other leaders. Residents lived in dormitories, with family groups separated and children raised communally. Regulation of both one's own behaviour, and that of one's relatives, was of paramount importance. This included reporting transgressions of self and others and accepting whatever punishment was deemed appropriate at group meetings. Non-member relatives were not permitted to visit Jonestown. Outgoing and incoming mail was censored by the leadership team. Sexual relations between partners were discouraged (although some members, male and female, did have sexual relations with Jones both in Jonestown and before the move).

In 1978 I was a member of Peoples Temple, living in the San Francisco Temple, a world away from Jonestown. Unlike those in Guyana, I ate well and slept comfortably. I knew I was missing the intensity and excitement of being in The Presence, but it was a relief I welcomed, though I would never have admitted it to anyone. (Kathryn R. [Tropp] Barbour at http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=40163)

No religious rituals or worship were held at Jonestown. Moore writes that day-to-day life was governed by the practicalities of running the community, whilst evenings were taken up with planning meetings and educational programs. There were two types of meeting of particular importance in Jonestown:

- 'Peoples Rallies' had an inward focus, discussed the existing conditions of the community, and oversaw the dispensing of punishment.
- 'White Nights' had an outward focus, discussing the perceived threats to the community, and including drills in which members prepared to defend themselves against attack.

A video of Jim Jones giving a tour of Jonestown, discussing farming and future plans can be seen below:

A video of members of Jonestown speaking in praise of the community, before 18 November, can be seen below

Controversies

Peoples Temple is infamous for the events which unfolded on 18 November 1978. This tragedy has been used over the years to generalise about all 'cults.'

But, of course, the events of 18 November had a longer history. Moore (2012) lists a number of incentives or pressures which encouraged Jones' 'relatively speedy immigration from California to Guyana,' including the Internal Revenue Service's examination of the Temple's income, the appearance of critical media articles, and the rise and increasing activity of the Concerned Relatives organisation. A number of former members had brought lawsuits against the church, including the child custody case of John Victor Stoen (see Wessinger 2000 and Moore 2012 for more on this case).

Deviance amplification (see Wright and Palmer 2016, 106 for a definition) was certainly at play here as the persecution of Jones' and his followers contributed to the community becoming more inward-focused and more prepared to defend itself at any cost. The community became convinced that there was a conspiracy against them and that they were being investigated by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) for their socialist beliefs.

Wessinger, suggests that it was these factors, combined with the members' polarised dualistic thinking which pitted the 'righteous remnant' against 'evil capitalistic society,' which led them to acts of violence in the belief that the protection of their community justified any means. In Wessinger's analysis, this moved the group from what she calls a progressive millennial movement to a catastrophic one (2000, 34).

The persecution of the community led Jones' health to deteriorate. He came to rely increasingly on prescription drugs: his autopsy showed high levels of barbiturates in his body consistent with a drug addiction. He began to fly into rages. Sometimes he struggled to speak coherently. At other times he rambled throughout the night over the PA system, leaving members sleep-deprived.

Jones also initiated the 'White Nights' meetings and suicide drills. 'White Nights' were practice runs for Jonestown being under imminent attack, a threat which members perceived as reality. Moore (2012) writes

that the first 'White Night' most likely took place in September 1977 when a lawyer representing some of the Concerned Relatives served court papers to Jones. Members, including children, armed themselves and patrolled the perimeter of Jonestown.

'White Nights' often included discussions of suicide but should not be conflated with the suicide drills which occurred separately. Suicide drills had been discussed as early as 1973. In 1976 Jones had tested some key members by telling them the wine they had consumed was poison (Moore 2012).

Another drill occurred in Jonestown in February 1978. Members were told by Jones and the leadership that there was a coup against the Guyanese government and that they must commit suicide. A vat of poison was brought out and residents lined up to drink, with those who voiced dissent and opposition to the plan drinking first. After around 45 minutes, members were told it was a drill.

Therefore, it is certainly the case that prior to 18 November, members were living in an increasingly inward focused and paranoid community in which their loyalty to Jones and to each other was regularly tested. Actual violence, in the form of corporal punishment, and discussions of violence, including suicide, murder of opponents, martyrdom and assassination plots, were commonplace.

Jones inculcated a sense of generalized terror beginning in the 1960s with predictions of nuclear war, and continuing in the 1970s with prophecies of racial genocide, fascist takeover, and ubiquitous torture. (Rebecca Moore at <http://www.wrldrels.org/profiles/PeoplesTemple.htm>)

November 1978

In November 1978, Californian Congressman Leo J. Ryan responded to the Concerned Relatives by agreeing to visit Jonestown on a 'fact-finding mission'. He wanted to ascertain whether any members were being held against their will. He was accompanied by a number of Concerned Relatives and critical journalists. After negotiations, the party visited Jonestown on 17 November and were initially impressed by the commune.

However, that night and the following day, 18 November, 16 residents asked to leave Jonestown with Ryan's party. When the party reached the airstrip at Port Kaituma, they were shot at by a number of Jonestown's residents who had followed them. Congressman Ryan, three journalists and one of the residents who wanted to leave, were killed at the airstrip. Those responsible for the murders at the airstrip returned to Jonestown to commit suicide with the community.

Meanwhile, in Jonestown, Jones directed residents to assemble in the main pavilion. He told them what had happened at the airstrip, that the authorities would soon be arriving, and that the only option left to them was 'revolutionary suicide' (a term coined by co-founder of the Black Panther Party Huey P. Newton to indicate the need for African Americans to stand up for their own rights even at risk to their own lives) (Yates 2008).

Despite some objections, 90% of Jonestown residents either committed suicide or were murdered on that day. Of the 100 or so survivors, only four managed to escape the killings at the pavilion (two young men fled and two elderly people hid). The remainder had been away from Jonestown for various reasons.

Poison was provided in the form of a punch of Flav-R-Aid and/or Kool-Aid, potassium cyanide and a mix of sedatives and tranquilizers. Parents administered the poison to their children before taking it themselves. Some drank the poison from a cup, some had it squirted into their mouths and some were injected with it. Armed guards prevented residents from leaving before they too took the poison. (This is where the saying 'drink the Kool-Aid,' comes from, suggesting blindly following orders to your detriment).

Sharon Amos, a member living at the group's house in Georgetown, received the order from Jonestown and killed her three children before committing suicide. Jones and one other member died from gunshot wounds to the head: it is not known whether they were self-inflicted. Four months later, the Church's public relations man, Mike Prokes (who had been sent to the Soviet Embassy in Georgetown, Guyana, when the suicides started) shot himself in the head after calling a news conference in California. He stated that he did not want to dissociate himself from the people who died at Jonestown.

However, discussion of suicide had been commonplace in the community since the early 1970s. Members own writings show a willingness to die for their cause. Members believed, following Jones' teachings, that the community would eventually be persecuted and that their children would be tortured by government authorities.

Read some of the member's 'Last Words' at http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=13940

Now what's going to happen here in a matter of a few minutes is that one of those people on that plane is gonna — gonna shoot the pilot. I know that. I didn't plan it, but I know it's going to happen. They're gonna shoot that pilot, and down comes that plane into the jungle. And we had better not have any of our children left when it's over, because they'll parachute in here on us....

So my opinion is that we be kind to children and be kind to seniors and take the portion like they used to take in ancient Greece, and step over quietly, because we are not committing suicide. It's a revolutionary act. We can't go back. They won't leave us alone. They're now going back to tell more lies, which means more congressmen. And there's no way, no way we can survive....

(Pleading) I, with respect, die with a degree of dignity. Lay down your life with dignity. Don't lay down with tears and agony....Don't be this way. Stop this hysterics. This is not the way for people who are Socialists or Communists to die. No way for us to die. We must die with some dignity. We must die with some dignity. (Pause) We will have no choice. Now we have some choice. (Tape edit) Do you think they're gonna stand — allow this to be done and allow us to get by with this? You must be insane. (Pause) Look children, it's just something to put you to rest. (Tape edit) (Despairing tone) Oh, God.

(Children crying)....

We said — one thousand people who said, we don't like the way the world is. (Tape edit) Take

some. (Tape edit) Take our life from us. We laid it down. We got tired. (Tape edit) We didn't commit suicide, we committed an act of revolutionary suicide protesting the conditions of an inhumane world.

Excerpts from Jones's address to residents, 18 November 1978, from the transcript of the 'Death Tape' (transcribed by Fielding M. McGehee III). Online at http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=29079; MP3 at [http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/nas/streaming/dept/scuastaf/collections/peoplestemple/MP3/Q042%20\(Side%20A\).mp3](http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/nas/streaming/dept/scuastaf/collections/peoplestemple/MP3/Q042%20(Side%20A).mp3)

The death toll on 18 November was 918 people. There were 909 at Jonestown, five at Port Kaituma airstrip and four at the group house in Georgetown (Moore 2012). The 300 or so minors cannot have been complicit in the act and must be considered as murder victims. Injection puncture marks found on around 80 bodies also suggest that some could not, or would not, drink the poison willingly. Around half of the bodies were claimed by relatives: around 400, the majority of them children, were either unidentified or unclaimed.

These bodies were buried by an interfaith group in Evergreen Cemetery, Oakland, California. In May 2011, memorial plaques were erected at the site listing all of those who died at Jonestown.

Further Reading

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Online Resources

Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple—<http://jonestown.sdsu.edu>

A website sponsored by the Department of Religious Studies at San Diego State University and managed by Professor Rebecca Moore. It contains both academic analysis and the Peoples Temple own materials including tapes, photographs, letters, personal reflection pieces and more.

A Peoples Temple Meeting with Jim Jones. 2015. YouTube Video, Public Domain Contents [Online]. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZgPfhweByuw>

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