



David Chidester. *Salvation and Suicide: Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003. 224 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21632-8.

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Salvation and Suicide

November 18, 2003 marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of one of the past century's most chilling events: the Jonestown mass suicide-murder that claimed over nine hundred lives. In recognition of that anniversary and the new urgency that now surrounds "this question of the relation between religion and violence" (p. xvii), Indiana University Press has published a "revised edition" of David Chidester's important 1988 analysis of that event. The timing and topic both warrant a new edition, but it is misleadingly billed and somewhat misstates the nature of its continuing relevance. The 2003 edition is not a revised edition so much as a reprint with a short (twelve-page) prologue attached. Beyond that, the two editions are identical right down to the font and type-setting. And Chidester's statement of the pertinence of his 1988 monograph to our post-September 11 world is informed as much by prophetic instincts as by scholarly judgment.

The prologue starts well enough by restating the original objectives of the book. Chidester wanted to deconstruct the "layers of strategic denial" that greeted news of Jonestown, the various modes of "cognitive distancing" that relegated it to the opaque realm of deviance and "otherness," and thus prevented genuine understanding of either self or other. His primary aim, however, was to reconstruct the symbolic-moral universe of Jim Jones and the People's Temple, retrieving it as an authentically religious worldview that yielded a sense of personhood and purpose to its members. By so doing, Chidester showed how it was possible that, within that worldview, the movement's demise in an orgy of "revolutionary suicide" (p. xviii) could have been perceived as a redemptive or, at least, a humanizing event.

In addition, Chidester challenged readers to see what those strategies of denial may have hidden from their view, namely, the continuity between what went

on at the People's Temple and "normal" religion. By destabilizing the constructed boundaries between true religion and false "cults," he revealed Jonestown as an instance of religion per se. Through his invitation to reflect on "the ways in which violence may be inherent in religious worldviews" (p. xv), Chidester performed a service that is certainly as relevant now as it was then. Times like these compel us to reflect on the potential outcomes of the necessary original sin of religion as such, namely, the suspension of disbelief (the *sine qua non* of the joys of faith as much as of film and fiction). Most believers, having slipped or been socialized into the bubble of their particular religious world, bob gently along the stream of life no more if no less violently than the great mass of humanity, steering clear of malevolent shoals by means of an ad hoc gyroscope that balances the ideological and the practical, the religious worldview and what Alfred Schutz called "everyday reality." (Most people do not mind if their airline pilot is deeply religious, the historian George Marsden once remarked, but when stalled on the tarmac, even the pious would prefer that he or she call a mechanic before casting the devil out of the carburetor.) That dialectic, together with the pragmatic and pacifistic checks built into most religious systems, are usually enough to ward off the dark and delusional side of faith. But other outcomes are possible, and Chidester rightly calls us to recognize this. Religion can be dangerous business. By giving this profoundly stigmatized movement a serious and sympathetic treatment, and by challenging readers to peer into the shadows of their own religious cosmos, Chidester shows the true grit that good scholarship is made of.

But then Chidester's prolegomena takes a wrong turn and accomplishes what I, before opening this volume, would have thought impossible: he brought me to the defense of Ronald Reagan and George W.

Bush. Presumably alarmed by the atmosphere of global crisis exacerbated by Washington's new "middle finger" school of diplomacy, and with an entirely laudable desire to make his scholarship useful, Chidester casts this revised edition as a platform for criticizing America's Republican-dominated foreign policy of the last quarter century. Both Jim Jones and Ronald Reagan, we learn, "employed the powerful ideology of redemptive sacrifice in order to justify mass death," and both were locked into the "Cold War conflict between capitalism and communism." Following the events of September 11, 2001, G. W. Bush revitalized "the ideology of redemptive sacrifice" by valorizing U.S. troops' willingness "to make the ultimate sacrifice of their lives." In sum, the "sacrificial symbols in and through which people die and kill are not only running wild through the jungles, but are also securely established in the nation's capital" (pp. xxiii-xxvi). Thus was the face of Jim Jones superimposed over those of Ronald Reagan and G. W. Bush.

This, regrettably, is the classic "bowling balls and b-b's" syllogism (they are the same because both are shiny, hard, and round) that has long been the bane of history of religions analysis. It might have been instructive to hold up the mirror to nationalism, or ideologies of warfare, or valorizations of ultimate sacrifice as such. But to simply equate the ubiquitous symbolism that has sanctified clan-based, tribal, sectarian, nationalist and revolutionary bloodshed since time immemorial—the willingness to kill or be killed and to send others to kill or be killed in the name of abstractions—with the mass suicide-homicide committed at Jonestown, and to single out G. W. Bush or Ronald Reagan as its chief agents, is misguided and misleading. Chidester's truer and better instincts, ironically, had already led him to chastise other scholars for lumping together disparate sects on the basis of their violent outcomes. But the differences between transgressive mass suicide and the almost universally normalized canons of chauvinism, and between a willful act of suicide and warfare (in which the aim is not so much to die for one's cause as to kill for one's cause in the hope that one might not have to die for it after all) are at least as pronounced as those that distinguish groups like Jonestown, the Branch Davidians, Heaven's Gate, and Aum Shinrikyo.

If Chidester had really wanted a closer fit with current geopolitics, he could have found it in the several jihadist cults of martyrdom now flourishing in various parts of the Islamic world and its global di-

aspora. Indeed, Chidester's sections on comparative suicide (see below) have precisely the kind of relevance that would form the rationale for reprinting his monograph in the first place. Interestingly enough, Thomas Robbins in 1989, had already observed the book's neglect of Islamic traditions of sacred martyrdom.[1] Fifteen years ago, that could be regarded simply as an oversight. Now, it appears to be an evasion. Chidester clearly has the courage to "speak truth to power." But does he have the courage to speak truth at the risk of being thought complicit with power?

This entire discussion, fortunately, is something of a tempest in a teapot because Chidester does not extend the new thesis into his book, which remains untouched from its original printing. As a purgative moment in the prologue, the political gambit does no harm to the original scholarship, which remains both relevant and compelling.

Salvation and Suicide begins with an introductory survey of Jones's life and death, surveying the astonishing range of religious, cultural, and political currents that converged in his rise to religious prominence. Oneness and Trinitarian Pentecostalism, the Latter Rain movement, dispensational premillennialism, faith healing, Klan racism, Civil Rights activism, Father Divine's Peace Mission movement, radical socialism, liberation theology and its black power/black theology analogs, the social gospel, sixties consciousness, urban politics, and nuclear apocalypticism all converged in the frenetic persona of Jim Jones as he made his way from Pentecostal faith healer to Christian socialist to self-deifying gnostic redeemer.

Chidester next sets his theoretical framework and analyzes death-related rituals with an eye to their multivalency. He places special stress on how such rituals "oscillate between exclusion and inclusion" (p. 14). He first applies that framework, however, not to the People's Temple but to the American public. He explicates not "their" worldview but "ours," as revealed in the convoluted responses to Jonestown in general and the dead of Jonestown in particular. Though somewhat "confined" by his Foucauldian grid, and marred by the occasional over-interpretation, Chidester nonetheless delivers a thought-provoking interpretation of the "strategies of avoidance, detachment, and aversion" (p. 24) that accompanied the transfer of corpses from Guyana to the United States and the subsequent squabble over their final disposition. Among other things, readers will benefit from recalling the cult paranoia of the late 1970s and early

1980s, and from observing the odd symmetry between “cult” worldviews and the hermetically sealed worldviews of many of their anti-cult antagonists. Indeed, the notion of “brainwashing,” Chidester points out, was first extended to religion in an effort to explain the reorienting effect of evangelical revivalism. And it is always instructive to revisit a past era’s *bête noire*.

The central task of *Salvation and Suicide*, however, is to provide a “religiohistorical interpretation” of Jim Jones and the People’s Temple that will “clarify the conditions of possibility within which the Peoples Temple emerged as a meaningful human enterprise” (pp. 46-47). It is to that task that Chidester then turns, guided by Robert Redfield’s thesis that the structural essence of a worldview is found in its classification of persons and its orientation of world viewers in space and time.

The Jim Jones/People’s Temple worldview, Chidester explains, classified persons into subhuman, human, and superhuman categories. The most prominent occupants of the superhuman category were the Divine Principle of Love (equals Socialism), and its bodily incarnation, Jim Jones. Jones emerged as a thaumaturgic savior who would awaken Temple members from their “delusionary beliefs” in an invisible, pie-in-the-sky god, the KJV Bible, and organized religion (p. 51). Moreover, he would deliver them from “subclassification—racism, sexism, ageism, classism, and poverty.” Throughout, Chidester helps us understand the audacity as well as the ambiguity of Jones’s messianic claims and so better imagine what made those claims plausible to his followers.

The People’s Temple “family” itself was taken to be the material form of the salvation Jones preached. There, the dehumanizing roles and values of capitalist America were inverted (e.g., “nigger” became a term of honor, the connotations of “black” and “white” were reversed, and the concept of private property was dissolved), and members joined together in an egalitarian community gathered around humanitarian ethics and communist social forms. Given that pervasive symbolic inversion I would quibble with Chidester’s definition of the subhuman in the Temple worldview. He takes it to be the traditionally oppressed and subclassified (blacks, women, poor). However, the subhuman within the Temple’s own worldview would seem to have been white, male Christian capitalists, those whom Jones called “the rich honkies that control the system” (p. 69). Finally, the truly human

were the oppressed who answered the call of “Apostolic Socialism,” the only “fully human society of fully human persons” (p. 78).

The People’s Temple orientation in cosmic, geographical, and bodily space began with Jones’s demythologization of an ethereal god and debunking of such concepts as heaven and hell. He shifted the focus of his followers to a “socialist utopian vision of a worldly heaven” (p. 79), while simultaneously decentering planet earth by positing a cosmos replete with other, more highly-evolved planets and beings (reminiscent of L. Ron Hubbard).

Geographically, Jones prophesied nuclear doomsday for America’s capitalist dictatorship and eventually led his followers to seek salvation in a “utopian promised land outside the boundaries of the United States” (p. 80). In addition, he elevated alternative symbolic centers (the Soviet Union, China, Cuba) to places of esteem in the sacred geography of the People’s Temple. America, for its part, emerged as Egypt, Babylon, Rome and the seat of the Anti-Christ (p. 90). The People’s Temple itself, both in the United States and after its removal to Jonestown, stood as sanctified space, an inviolable sanctuary whose integrity had to be defended against the slightest threat.

Jim Jones’s Apostolic Socialism also reoriented existential or bodily space, razing the “capitalist” constructions of self, morality, property, and sexuality. This humane community extended radical love (defined as “God Almighty, Socialism”) to all aspects of the self, which meant (alternately) celibacy or free love, the rejection of private ownership, and the fusion of individuals into one, indivisible family.

The structure of spatial orientation was paralleled by a three-fold orientation in time: cosmic, historical, and bodily. Cosmic time focused less on origins than on eschatology. More specifically, it fixated on the prospect of global annihilation via nuclear apocalypse, a drama of “destruction, redemption, and rebirth” that would form the terrible passageway to final triumph (p. 110). Historical time was a repeating cycle of oppression. That past drew on a wide range of standard history, agitprop, conspiracy theories, and Jones’s own delusions of grandeur. Its central exemplars included John Brown, Lenin, the Bolshevik revolution, and W. E. B. Du Bois, all preparing the way for Jones and the People’s Temple as the culmination of these revolutionary forces.

Bodily time revolved around the regimented, all-

consuming schedule of life in the People's Temple. Jones intensified standard routines and altered traditional patterns of wake, work, and sleep. The effect was to break down individuality and fuse members into a single, social corpus. Members were taught to view these austerities as the necessary death to self through which they might find their true personhood in the "apostolic socialist way" of the People's Temple (p. 123). Each dimension of time had its corresponding salvation: salvation from nuclear apocalypse by escaping to a safe haven; salvation from the cruel cycle of history by discovering and implementing a sacred destiny capable of breaking that cycle; and salvation from meaninglessness through sacrificial participation in the socialist revolution.

In the context of these multiple forms of salvation, Chidester fleshes out Jones's growing fixation on death, as he led the People's Temple from its familiarization and normalization toward a celebration, even courtship of death. As Jones exfoliated his ideology first of revolutionary death, and then of "revolutionary suicide" (the term was taken from Huey Newton's 1973 book of that title), he concluded that Apostolic Socialism mandated a communal death. "We want the world to know that we will exist together or we shall die together," Jones explained. The People's Temple had arrived at an "ideal of revolutionary death through collective suicide" (pp. 124-128).

Chidester's last chapter interprets the ideology of revolutionary suicide and narrates the events leading up to and including the mass suicide-homicide of November 18, 1978. As background, Chidester offers a helpful survey of the then-current literature on religious suicide, including analyses of suicide as a ritual of purification (*seppuku* in traditional Japan, *Sati* in India, *endura* among twelfth-century Cathari); suicide as release from suffering (Epicurean and Stoic ideals); suicide as an act of revenge or as a means of achieving justice ("Samsonic suicides"); and suicide as a revolutionary response to overwhelming forces, human or otherwise (Masada; Russian Old Believers). Jonestown, Chidester shows, contained elements of all of these (p. 136). Clearly, this section might have been profitably expanded in light of its contemporary relevance.

Suicide had been discussed by Jones, as a possible response to external attack, as far back as 1973 and socially potent rehearsals for suicide commenced in 1976. In Jonestown, Jones accelerated the frequency and intensity of "white nights," crisis events that typ-

ically began with a chilling account of the impending doom gathering about the People's Temple and concluded with dramatic demonstrations of the group's unflinching willingness to enact revolutionary suicide. Beneath it all lay the downward spiral of Jim Jones's psyche, his increasingly morose and erratic behavior, and his intensifying death wish.

By 1978, a triumvirate of enemies had emerged as the embodiment of evil in the worldview of the People's Temple: the Committee of Concerned Relatives (a group of defectors that had organized to expose the excesses of the People's Temple and to rescue relatives whom they believed to be held against their will), the American media, and the U.S. government. All three converged in November, 1978, with the descent on Jonestown of an investigative team headed by California congressman Leo Ryan. After two days of tours and interviews, Ryan's team tried to escort several disaffected members out of Jonestown. They were ambushed at the local airstrip by Jonestown's "Red Brigade," who killed five members of the entourage, including Ryan, and wounded nine others. That evening, the ritual of revolutionary suicide had its final, literal enactment.

Chidester's monograph is at once poignant, disturbing, and revealing. As previous reviewers have noted, it has the vices as well as the virtues of structuralist analysis and intellectual history: too much weight is given to symbolic constructions in explaining behavior; inadequate attention is given to disjunctions between ideals and actual practices; social, economic, and political dimensions of the story go undeveloped; it gives the impression of a rather static and uniform worldview. But this is largely to criticize Chidester for failing to achieve what he never set out to accomplish, and his method compensates for its weaknesses by delivering a wealth of comparative and interpretive insights.

Because he reconstructs the internal coherence of this movement in a non-normative manner, Chidester has also been admonished for glossing over what was by any reasonable measure a ghastly atrocity. This was clearly *not* the only way to realize one's humanity! Also, while it may be good to set aside the insights of abnormal psychology to a point, the People's Temple worldview and its fatal trajectory cannot be adequately explained apart from the narcissism, messianic delusions, death-obsession, and apparent drug abuse of Jim Jones. He was the architect of this perilous worldview and the precipitator of his follow-

ers' macabre destiny. In the end, even the "normal" may not be comprehensible without reference to the pathological.

Those complaints, however, also ring hollow. There is no shortage of books and articles decrying the horror of Jonestown and exposing the fractured mental health of its founder. What was lacking was a careful, sensitive, and theoretically astute reconstruction of the world in which Jonestown made sense. The

precondition to any sound use of normative judgment, after all, is an honest appraisal of the values or behavior to be judged. By giving us that reconstruction, Chidester has performed a lasting and laudable service.

Note

[1]. "Reconsidering Jonestown," *Religious Studies Review* 15 no. 1 (January 1989): pp. 32-36.

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