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# **THE CULT LEADER AS AGENT OF A PSYCHOTIC FANTASY OF MASOCHISTIC GROUP DEATH: THE “REVOLUTIONARY SUICIDE” IN JONESTOWN**

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## **Introduction**

Religious fervor has helped sculpt the landscape of American culture from the days of the pilgrim settlements to the present. Each American generation has known its share of religious prophets and profiteers, witch hunts and spiritual “great awakenings.” Courts of law often adhere to scriptural injunction, and parcel out exactly how much will be rendered unto Caesar and how much unto God, albeit usually in carefully cloaked, non-religious and constitutionally correct language. Over the past several decades or so we have been drifting inexorably into a pernicious and uncompromising era of anti-government and rigid religious sentiment, motivated by religious passions and an obsession with the “end-times”. This social shifting naturally spawns extremist and fanatical reactions. The formation of polarized and alienated groups, whether of the Left or the Right, also becomes fertile ground for the emergence of terrorist and cult groups.

We have previously elaborated upon the genesis of group formation among the fanatically oriented as well as a theory of dynamics of early cults (Twemlow, Sacco & Hough, in press). In this paper will focus upon one particularly malignant and ultimately self-destructive variation of cult evolution and demise: namely, the infamous case of Jonestown in the jungles of Guyana. We will attempt a conceptualization of this “group death” beginning with the earliest seeds of the problem and trace its slow metastatic spread over time. This model suggests some ideas for prevention, beyond the scope of this paper. There are also remarkable parallels in the apocalyptic rhetoric and consequent religious belief systems between the disciples of the People’s Temple of Jonestown, and certain strains of domestic terrorism within the United States. Among the latter we refer,

in particular, to the adherents of the Christian Identity Movement. We will draw upon our understanding of this US brand of religious terrorism, often referred to simply as the “Identity” movement, to illustrate the conceptual parallels between these two organizations and how an understanding of one informs the other.

In Jonestown’s final days, the organizational structure of this remote and isolated community became increasingly fragmented and psychotic, the end point we propose of predictable group regression. Thus, there would emerge from the mayhem of this jungle commune a final and inexorable group implosion with only one possible outcome: mass suicide. That a large group can self-destruct is neither unique nor altogether surprising. The classically heralded mass suicide by Jewish zealots during the Roman siege of Masada in 73 AD is a prime historical example. The first Roman troops to enter the fallen city beheld an astonishing spectacle; as every man, woman and child had voluntarily yielded to the sword rather than endure ignominious captivity and exile. Destruction on a smaller scale with groups can sometimes be seen in rogue military units or governmental systems, or even in dysfunctional attachment systems such as in an abusive marriage that turns into family homicide. On a macro-social level genocide has occurred often in the last century with the Jewish Holocaust, Cambodia, Rwanda and in Bosnia. Multiple actors in these scenarios contribute to the homicidal drama, from the top ranks of leadership down to the rank-and-file.

Though much has been written about the charismatic and destructive nature of Jim Jones’ messianic leadership (Hall, 1987; Lifton, 1999; Reston, 1981), less is understood

regarding the nature of the group dynamics of Jonestown and how these dynamics devolved towards the group's wholesale and deliberate self-annihilation. Our conceptualization of this group process is that Jim Jones himself was both the victim and perpetrator of the large group's masochistic unconscious wishes and yearnings for death and martyrdom. The groups' fantasies about itself and Jones' psychopathology became the crucible for a naturally shared outcome: release to a psychological threshold wherein these primitive wishes could be realized in reality.

As data for our understanding of the Jonestown group process we have analyzed the transcript of the very last of the "White Night" sermons, which had been delivered by Jim Jones to his followers at Jonestown on the eve of the mass suicide. (1) This material, we feel, illustrates the final stages of the actualization of a psychotic and co-created fantasy of masochistic group death. Jones had issued many such sermons in obvious preparation for mass suicide, following the cult's relocation to Guyana. In each he had exhorted the group to embrace death. Group members were often led to believe that they would be admonished to engage in mass-suicide in any one of these White Night sermons and even given Kool Aid without cyanide as a "dry run". During these ritualized and sham expressions of suicide Jones would expound on the threat posed by enemies to the People's Temple, as well as on the liberating possibilities of collective suicide. This sequence of crisis and ritualized rehearsal for death codified the suicide theology and prepared the way for the final White Night.

### **The Final Days of The People's Temple in Jonestown**

In 1975, the Reverend Jim Jones, the charismatic guru of the Peoples Temple, had moved most of his members from Northern California to a jungle clearing in remote Guyana and renamed it Jonestown. Guyana is a small nation located on the northeastern coast of South America. Soon after their arrival Jones declared it to be “the best heaven you could build on earth.” (Lifton, 1999, p. 281). Jones had originally founded his group as a Pentecostal church in 1956, in his home state of Indiana. Jones soon transcended ordinary Pentecostalism and its healing practices to become a prophet for the oppressed. He moved his church to Ukiah in the Redwood Valley of Northern California in 1965. This location was selected because the area had been designated as “the safest place in the United States” in the event of a nuclear war (Lifton, 1999, p. 281), an event Jones was certain would occur. The church was later expanded to the San Francisco and Los Angeles areas, where Jones preached racial harmony as he began to transform the church organization into a cult-like movement for social justice. Jones deified a primitive form of socialism and identified his own claim to be God along with it. In 1975 he began to feel under attack by some of his followers and decided to move to Guyana. Jones imagined developing a utopia there, while also espousing what he called “revolutionary suicide.” Jones took this term from Huey Newton, the Black Panther leader, who meant by it a form of revolutionary martyrdom, of constant struggle on behalf of the revolution while embracing the knowledge of one’s doom. Jones concretized the term by equating actual collective suicide with glorious revolutionary resistance.

From the beginning of his career Jones combined a unique brand of grandiose and visionary spirituality with destructiveness. As one observer put it, Jones had “claimed

the platform that Jesus occupied almost two millennia earlier” (Lifton, 1999, p. 284).

Later in his career, Jones proclaimed that “ I have come in the very person... of Christ the Revolution!” and “I am the only God you’ve ever seen.” In sermons he openly declared his disdain for the traditional deity: “If there is a God in the sky, I say, Fuck You” (Lifton, 1999, p. 284). Clearly his disciples revered him as the God they wanted him to be. A survivor who had participated in the murders of Congressman Ryan’s party reflected on his need to confer Jones as a deity: “He was the God I could touch.” (Lifton, 1999, p. 284). One disciple, who slept through the mass suicide as a result of illness, later became depressed because she was left behind.

In the remote jungles of Guyana, Jones demonstrated an increasing decompensation, with faltering control over his disciples. He had taken large amounts of painkillers, tranquilizers, and amphetamines since the early 1970’s. These addictions worsened with his emotional deterioration. Accordingly, he became more abusive and began to incorporate the use of extensive beatings and spankings of followers; in an especially cruel spectacle, children were pitted paired against larger adults in boxing matches. Jones expressed his greatest contempt, however, toward a group called Concerned Relatives, who had been inspired and organized by defectors from Jonestown, and who had become militant in their effort to expose Jones’ abuses. Each defection personally shook Jones and was felt to undermine his truth and authority- especially defections from those in positions of leadership. As the external threats against Jonestown mounted, Jones increased his demands over his followers, ultimately insisting that they must be prepared to die for their deity by embracing the doctrine of “revolutionary suicide” as the ultimate

expression of their loyalty to him. This plan was equated by Jones with the mass-suicide in Masada in A.D. 73, as well as with the resistance of the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto during World War II, with the martyrdom of the heroes of the Russian and Chinese revolutions, and with the American Civil Rights Movement. Through revolutionary suicide, Jones promised what Lifton (1999) calls “revolutionary immortality”, a state in this case attainable only through death.

Jones’ fierce apocalyptic visions gave rise to extraordinary spiritual intensity and to violence. Jones warned of the “great desolation, or the apocalypse, the Armageddon that will spring forth at nuclear hell.” (Lifton, 1999, p. 285). His millennial visions combined Pentecostal doomsday imagery with worldly political and military catastrophes, including “bombs, earthquakes, fascist revolutions.” Jones was obsessed with the threat of nuclear holocaust, so much so that Guyana was chosen in part because it was a place where there would be “no radiation coming our way” (Lifton, 1999, p. 285). Within the context of anticipated nuclear annihilation, Jones prepared an alternative mini-apocalypse, that of collective suicide. Thus, through the act of collective suicide he was able to simultaneously live out by his own hand the annihilation fantasy while also pre-empting the larger one he was certain would occur. A nuclear holocaust was also believed to bring about a cataclysmic cleansing of the world. He believed that a capitalist America was mired in decadence and sin. As Jones explained, “If you’re born in capitalist America, racist America, fascist America, then you’re born in sin” (Lifton, 1999, p. 286). However, this ordained impurity of the soul did not apply for those born in socialist societies. He saw his immortalizing principle as revolutionary socialism. He conceived

that the only survivors of a nuclear holocaust would be the members of the People's Temple and citizens of socialist states.

### **The Final White Night (2)**

In his rambling monologue on this final White Night, Jim Jones made it clear to his followers that they were embarking upon mass- suicide that evening and that everyone was to die. Jones speaks with a slurred voice, and his thinking is replete with circumstantial and paranoid meanderings. He is reacting to the pressure from the investigation by Congressman Ryan, which had been organized by ex-cult members and family members of current cult members. Jones understands that it is now only a matter of time before the authorities will close in on him. He went on to emphasize the painlessness of the "medical" arrangements that had been made, and demanded that members hasten to their death with speed and efficiency. There are also numerous uncomfortable references to the children being killed, and Jones struggled repeatedly with the parents to "get it over with" so the children would stop crying.

Jones begins to set the stage for this final drama by telling his followers that he has tried his best to give them peace, but that he has not been able to protect them from the onslaught of destructive forces, particularly from defectors who are out to destroy their community. The defectors are described as having come to steal the children out of the cult, acts for which Jonestown members had retaliated violently. The group's anxiety is no doubt heightened by the specter of intruders coming to steal away their children. This particular appeal to the image of child abduction will be repeated throughout the tape, as the children must be killed in order to save them. Thus, members are reminded that they

are heroically choosing death rather than become crushed by the enemy forces now closing in. In his first pronouncement on the tape Jones laments:

I have very much tried my best to give you a good life. (Crowd noisily chanting in the background). Despite all that I've tried, a handful of our people, not only are there those who have left ... the betrayal of the century. Some have stolen children from mothers and are in pursuit right now to kill them, because they stole their children. I mean we are sitting here on a powder keg and I don't think that is what we want to do with our babies, I don't think that is what we had in mind to do with our babies. It was said by the greatest of prophets from time in memorial: 'No man may take my life from me, I lay my life down...' So just to sit here and wait for the catastrophe that's going to happen on that airplane... It's going to be a catastrophe. It almost happened here, it almost happened, the congressman was nearly killed here, but you can't steal people's children, you can't take off with people's children without expecting a violent reaction... But if we can't live in peace, then let us die in peace. I've been so betrayed, I've been so violently betrayed...

As Jones makes further appeals to protect the children from harm, the act of infanticide becomes a kindness to them. Jones also introduces once again the concept of death as a "revolutionary act."

So, my opinion is that you be kind to children and you be kind to seniors and take the position like we used to take an ocean breeze and step over quietly because we are not committing suicide- it's a revolutionary act. We can't go back, we won't loose it for long, we're not going back to tell more lies which means congressmen, there is no way, no way we can survive.

Later, Jones continues to articulate a particular kind of existential revolt against life and expounds upon why he embraces death. It is noteworthy that the crowd is becoming audibly more enthusiastic as Jones continues with his appeal to mass death. Jones further describes his identity as fused with the individual members of the community, and of psychologically having taken on their burdens as his own. He will not abandon them now. Death is again framed as a revolutionary act. Jones will then negate the idea of seeking asylum with the Russians, and in grandiose fashion tells the group he is a prophet who knows in advance that the Russians would deny their request for political asylum

were they to seek it. Jones elaborates:

How come everybody dies...that hope runs on, cause everybody dies. I haven't seen anybody that didn't die, and I like to choose my own kind of death. So many people's lives in my hands and I certainly don't want your life in my hands. I've been telling you this about me, life has no meaning. (Crowd can be heard cheering wildly in background). I'm the best friend you'll ever have. I have to pay. I'm standing with you Darra, I'm standing with those people, and they are a part of me. I can't detach myself...detach myself; no, no, no, no, no, I never detach myself from any of your troubles. I've always taken your troubles right on my shoulders...I'm not going to change it now. (Crowd can be heard clapping and cheering)... That is...what I'm talking about, now is the dispensation of judgment, this is a revolutionary suicide council. I'm not talking about self...self-destruction. I'm talking about what...we have no other road... I will take your call. We will put it to the Russians, and I can tell you the answer now because I'm a prophet.

Jones later repeats that he had tried to bring peace to the group but had failed. Since he had not been able to deliver on this effort for peace, in a Christ-like manner Jones responds that it is time to die:

I tried to give it to you. I laid down my life practically. I practically died every day to give you peace. And you've still not had any peace. You look better than I've seen you in a long time, but it's still not the kind of peace that I wanted to give you. A person's a fool who continues to say that you're winning when you're losing. Win one, lose two, what?" He continues with his martyr-like analogy, ragefully observing that the world was not yet ready to receive him: "I made my manifestation and the world is not ready... not ready for me... Paul said there was a man born out of season... I've been born out of season just like all we are and the best testimony we can make is to leave this God damn world. (Crowd again cheering loudly).

As Jones later in the tape reiterates that it is time to die, the members of the community are by this time cheering exuberantly at the idea. From this point forward there will emerge numerous spontaneous exhortations by audience members for the community to embrace its death. A member of the audience now spontaneously encourages death as well and invites others to follow: "Brothers and sisters... it's over. When we made that day, we made a beautiful day and let's make it a beautiful day." (Crowd going wild with

cheers and applause).

A second audience member spontaneously comments immediately: “Beware when we go down they’ll have nobody else to hate. They have nobody else to hate. Many will destroy themselves.”

However, in the midst of the numerous calls for their communal death a lone female audience member does raise her objections to collective suicide. This voice was later identified as that of a 60-year-old black female named Christine Miller. Miller can be heard arguing against collective suicide; instead, she reasserted that the community should seek sanctuary in Russia. After Jones asserts that it is too late for Russia, she courageously persists:

But I don’t see it like that, I mean as long as there’s life, there’s hope. That’s my feeling. Christine would elaborate: “ I want to live, but I still think as an individual. I have a right” Jones encourages her to speak, where she continues with:” And I think I have a right to prove mine and everybody else has a right to prove theirs.” Jones then trumps Miller with his appeal to his omnipotence: “I’m going to tell you, Christine, without me, life has no meaning. I’m the best thing you’ll ever have” and he reaffirms the revolutionary nature of the act of suicide.

The resistance might have gone on further were it not for several other members who came to Jones’ assistance. The first of these individuals attempts to persuade Miller:

Christine, we are all standing here because he is here in the first place. So I don’t know what you’re talking about having individual rights? Your life has been extended to the day that you’re standing there because of him (Crowd can be heard cheering wildly).

When Miller speaks up once again, Jones responds with annoyance:“ How can you tell the leader what to do if you live?” Then with a loving assertion for her life he adds: “

You’re life is precious to me. It’s as precious as John’s (Jones’ adoptive son, to whom he

was strongly attached)...and I've weighed it against all evidence." Miller replies, "that's all I've got to say" and she is not heard from again on the tape. Her body was found along with the rest. There were no other vocalized objections to collective suicide after Miller. Rather, the appeals for communal death and the farewell testimonials increased exponentially. One loyal member delivered his testimonial to Jones in tears: "We're all ready to go. If you tell us we have to give our lives now, we're ready. All the rest of the sisters and brothers are with me."

Another member testifies for Jones and reiterates the theme of not letting the children be harmed by the invading enemy:

I care a great deal because of Jim Jones and the way the children are laying there now, I'd rather see them lay like that than to see them have to die like the Jews did. It's just pitiful anyhow. And I'd like to thank Dad for giving us life and also breath and I appreciate the fact the way our children are going... when they come here, what they are going to do to our children, they are going to massacre our children... the bastards they are going to let grow up and be dummies like they want them to be. And I grew up to be a person like the one and only Jim Jones. And I'd like to thank Dad (Jones preferred to be called father by the followers), for the opportunity to let him go... not what it could be... but what Jonestown is... thank you Dad.

Yet another testimonial later follows which refers to Jones as a "father" for the community:

What I would like to say is that my, uhm, my so-called parents are filled with so much hate and treachery... I think you people out here should think about how your relatives were and be glad about the security of being laid to rest and I would like to say that I thank you Dad for making me strong to stand with you all and make me ready for it. Thank you.

Despite the numerous heartfelt testimonials of support, Jones is annoyed that he cannot stop the resistance from parents unwilling to kill their children. At times he feels the need

to address them both directly:

Look children, it's just something to put you to rest." And " Oh God. Mother, mother, mother, mother, mother... please, please, please don't (woman in background can be heard hysterically crying loudly) don't do this, don't do this. Lay down your life with your child, keep your emotion down. The poison will not hurt if you will be quiet, if you will be quiet (a second woman can be heard screaming in the background). It's never been done before you say? It's been done by every tribe in history. Every tribe facing annihilation... No, no sorrow that it's all over. I'm glad it's over. Hurry, hurry my children, hurry... All I say is let's not fall in the hands of the enemy. Hurry, my children, hurry.

Jones insists that parents deceive their children into taking the poison: " If you quit telling them they're dying, if you adults would stop some of this nonsense. Adults, adults, adults... I call on you to quit exciting your children when all they're doing is going to a quiet rest." Finally, Jones issues a stronger rallying cry by issuing an appeal to the community's socialist pride: " I call on you to stop this now if you have any respect at all. Are we black, proud and socialist or what are we?"

Even as Jones blames the by now inexorable mass suicide on the ' betrayal' by defectors, notably by Timothy Stoen (who is the father of Jones' adopted son, John), he acknowledges his own prior destructive impulse towards Jonestown: "He has done the thing we wanted to. Have us destroyed."

Our analysis of the final White Night audiotope would not be complete without including the final comment uttered by Jones, which is also the very last human voice to be heard on the tape. Again, Jones restates for posterity that the revolutionary act of mass suicide is a final and determined renunciation of the human condition:

If you don't... don't follow my advise you'll be sorry... If we do it then that they do it.... Have trust in... you have to step across. We used to sing this world, this world it's not

our home, well it sure isn't. We were saying, it sure wasn't. And we don't want to tell him... the only thing to tell him... assure these kids, some people can assure these children of the relaxation of stepping over to the next plane. We'll set an example for others... we set... one thousand people who've said we don't like the way the world is. Take our life from us. We lay it down, we're tired. We didn't commit suicide; we committed an act of revolutionary suicide protesting the conditions of [an] angry world. (Loud organ music continues to play eerily in the background. After Jones' final statement no human voices are heard hereafter).

### **Discussion**

We have previously indicated that a dangerous domestic terrorist group of the religious Right, known as Christian Identity, demonstrates pernicious similarities with the ideological extremes of the Peoples Temple. We here incorporate our understanding of the remarkable ideological and teleological overlap between these otherwise geographically and temporally divergent groups. The perspective of each informs and enriches our understanding of the other. Both groups combine anti-government politics with an eschatological and apocalyptic vision (3), which ideologically and emotionally binds its adherents to one another. Differences between the groups include the fascist white supremacist identity: Christian Identity, the progeny of British Israelism, a 19th century belief that contends that white Christians are the real Israelites, preaches that America is a divinely bestowed white Christian homeland to be won in an apocalyptic battle against the Jewish-dominated US government, race traitors, and minorities. Christian Identity adherents, and other white supremacists, refer to the US government as the Zionist Occupational Government (ZOG). Like Jones, they believe that after the great millennial end battle, the Second Coming of Christ will take place as a final act, spiritually cleansing a sinful world. Oddly, Jones embraced evangelical black preachers, and at one time garnered support from liberals like former President Jimmy Carter.

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Although most Christian denominations teach that the second coming of Christ will be preceded by a "great tribulation", most also teach that believers will either be protected from their adversaries or "raptured" prior to Christ's return. Christian Identity and The Peoples Temple suggest neither: adherents are encouraged to prepare for mortal combat to deal with the coming Armageddon (4), the great battle wherein Christ, (or Jim Jones), will vanquish his enemies and establish his reign on earth. It is a commonly held belief among many denominations that the year 2000 or thereabouts (5), represents the end of six 1,000-year periods. Believing that the beginning of the next millennium is fulfillment of the biblical statement that "on the seventh day, God rested," the return of Christ is seen as imminent. Christian Identity militants have used fear of the coming tribulation as a vehicle to attract new recruits. Christian Identity believes the world is on the verge of a violent apocalyptic struggle, between God and Satan- a battle to be fought with racial enemies, including the US government. Fear of a one-world government, a single universal currency, a cash-less society, and the increasingly sophisticated technological ability of government to monitor the religious activities of citizens, adds fuel to fears regarding "the great tribulation". Jones countered these pervasive millennial fears with a primitive, poorly thought through, neo-marxist ideology. Though most millenarians believe that only God knows the timetable for the Messiah's return, some believe that prayer, repentance and martyrdom can expedite the process. Apocalyptic groups such as Christian identity and the Peoples Temple would add terror to this list. As Stern (1999) has observed, a critical indicator for any group's proclivity for violence is the nature of its core myth:

Groups that model themselves on an avenging angel or a vindictive god (such as Christ

with a sword, Kali, or Phineas), are more likely to lash out than those whose core myth is the suffering Messiah, though some movements switch myths under pressure (such as the pressure caused by the imminence of the millennium) (p. 72).

Yet part of the problem with all forms of religious extremism, and particularly with variants as bizarre as that of Jones, is the difficulty experienced by the average person, even a sophisticated psychologist or psychoanalyst, to make a connection with such behavior in any way other than via extreme psychopathology. We conceptualize that in order to accurately situate cult formation in its social context, it is necessary to understand the identifiable and predictable sequence of developmental stages that emerge along a continuum of extremism. Seen from this developmental perspective, extremism enters its proper place along the normal continuum of human psychopathology (albeit on the extreme end of the continuum), perhaps as an inherent potential for all of us. It was striking that the range of adherence to the psychotic fantasies of Jim Jones ranged across the spectrum of social classes and across all levels of education, including highly educated professionals. It has never been demonstrated that the adherents to extremist groups have any active or clear psychopathology. So it behooves us all to take a careful look at our own potential for extremist behavior.

### **The Growth and Death of Cults :**

In Twemlow Sacco & Hough, in press 2004, we gave a case example of an East Coast financial services company, one which we believe could be conceptualized as being in the early process of evolving into a cult. This early formation case serves an instructive contrast to the terminal stage of cult development with Jonestown. This company had asked for organizational consultation because of a high turnover in senior staff and their

difficulty in retaining new senior staff. The work environment paid high wages, offered excellent benefits, and had retained staff for many decades. The work environment on the surface seemed ideal, and the company CEO was resistant to the intervention since he felt he had created an ideal work environment. He was forced into the consultation by an uncomfortable not-for-profit managing board, which was concerned that, in spite of its excellent financial record, new ideas were not being introduced into the organizational culture.

In summary, the consultation revealed that beneath the company's apparent laudable surface there was much coercion, hatred for the leader, and difficulty the staff had in expressing themselves. The leader used an interpretive stance to deflect and sadistically attack staff whenever they would formulate their own analysis of the company's situation. Senior staff was especially threatening to this leader. If they challenged his autocratic management style, they were openly attacked at staff meetings. Assessment of senior staff, both from a psychiatric as well as an organizational perspective, suggested that the leader was a severely narcissistic man who had come in to employment to rescue the organization from financial ruin, and himself from a professionally unchallenging personal life and a messy divorce.

The organization itself had felt it was very special and yet had been marginalized within the financial industry because of its adherence to out-of-date ideas. Nonetheless, the many staff who had worked for decades for the company felt that their specialness was not sufficiently recognized. They believed that if the organization could be rescued and rejuvenated they would again become leaders on Wall Street. The leader articulated the

groups' fantasies of specialness but left everyone guessing about what he himself thought, demanding that they continue guessing until he acknowledged the correctness of the guess. This seductive -coerciveness to the outsider seemed frankly bizarre, but most of the staff had habituated to it over the years. However, new senior staff members, who were supposedly in leadership roles, had not joined the paring assumption of this group. The CEO carefully controlled the external boundary, which separated the internal organizational culture from the external world, reassuring staff that he could do all that was necessary to interface with the external world. When senior staff openly criticized his boundary maintenance style, the leader reacted in a martyred and victimized way, and dismissed all attacks on his interpretations as mere projections. The staff maintained the unconscious fantasy that this leader would actualize their self-referential idea of group specialness. In the end, it appeared to the outside consultants that the theme of the leader's relationship with the employees was to strike an unconscious deal with them: submit to my view, collect information on my enemies, and in turn I will allow you to be secure in an easy job. The consultants were degraded and marginalized by the "cult" leader, whose fantasy was that the recommendations would include firing him, instead the recommendation was to invite new blood in a series of development consultants with widely differing views, to enrich and enhance the good from the old ways, and to assist in raising money to market and promote the unique skills of the company. These innocuous suggestions did not challenge the manageable omnipotent fantasies of the group, while ameliorating the paranoia of the leader the company became reconnected to the mainstream. . It was recommended that senior staff be recruited from within until

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the board was comfortable with the growth of the company.

The central concept we wish to convey is that the leader of this company, as was the case with Jim Jones, had become an embodiment, and in some sense a victim, of the group's masochistic and omnipotent fantasies, without a terminal end stage being reached. A leader who fails to fulfill the groups' unconscious demands may be ejected or rudely deposed. From this perspective, we feel there is a reductionistic danger and error in assuming that group members are invariably mindless followers, or merely suggestible victims of a cult leader's psychopathology and of intensive group regression. Our perspective is that the element which makes the difference between a salvageable early cult, as was the case with this financial organization, and ones that end up in malignant group-death- as in the case of Jonestown-is the way in which aggression is metabolized into the basic assumptions of Bion (1961,1967), and as this concept is amplified by Rioch (1970) and Ganzarain (1980).

It is clear that Bion's basic assumptions of group behavior, and the group's fantasies about the leader, are not linear stages in group evolution and are present in varying degrees most of the time. Yet as Bion observed (1961), the more the group functions at the level of the Basic Assumptions, "the less it makes any rational use of verbal communication while nonverbal exchanges prevail... groups would, in Freud's view, approximate to neurotic patterns of behavior, whereas in my view they would approximate to patterns of psychotic behavior" ( p. 181). Our observation is that in the early life history of cult formation, the shared group fantasy and the leader's psychopathology congeal rather quickly into an enduring *pairing* basic assumption

relationship. Within the complex matrix of this particular version of pairing the leader is cast in a messianic and ultimately unattainable role, while the followers concomitantly maintain a primitive hope and yearning that their leader will realize and become the incarnation of their infantile fantasies. Through the primitive defensive operations of splitting and projective identification the group then further pathologizes the leader, who becomes locked into what could be seen as a victim/victimizer relationship with the group; in this paradigm, the leader being the victim of the group's fantasy projections, whereas the group could be seen as the victimizer.

In the process of early cult formation, the leader will often experience initial triumph and successes rather than mature satisfaction. Similarly the cult's members will further idealize even the smallest successes of such a leader. The disturbed leader, suffering from existential despair and failure to realize personal ideals, experiences a marked elevation of infantile omnipotence that is reinforced dialectically by the expectations and yearnings of the group members. Disappointments in early cults are experienced as a form of martyrdom by the cult leader, and the leader then begins to contribute to the fantasy of being the unique messiah who must experience pain and suffering for the cause of the group. Although the pairing assumption gives a sense of unity to the group the essential distinction between container (the leader) and the contained (the group members). is destroyed by aggression and destructive envy in malignant cults. This unmetabolised aggression destroys the "space" between leader and follower and thus impairs the ability of members of the group to grow and differentiate from each other, ie become a working group. Ultimately a fight-flight leader emerges, as in the case of Jones, an end stage is reached where the group surrenders its mind to the leader who can only

act not think & reflect, so clearly delineated in the tape transcripts of the followers blind adherence to Jones illogical rhetoric.

Building upon this brief description of the psychogenesis of early cult formation, we propose a possible staging of the life history of group death in cults which could include the following:

Stage 1: Where there is a pathological fusion of sadism and love with a masochistic-victim- martyr defensive response to criticism from the leader, and occasionally in the followers, who then triumphantly and euphorically both identify with the leaders philosophy and denigrate it.

Stage 2: Diffusion of sadism and love in the leader is magnified by the group fantasy and gradually the group and leader become greedy, voracious, envious, and anxious and impatient about their acceptance by the external world. The group fantasy develops a special pseudospeciatiated attitude towards its own role vis-à-vis other groups (E. Erikson 1985; K. Erikson, 1996). With the group leader embodying the group's emerging cannibalistic envy, gradually then this omnipotent mind set causes new ideas and new people to be ridiculed by the leader. Such leaders and groups tend to recruit new members from the children and friends of those already converted to the cult fantasy. Thus, the group unconsciously desires and requires a training experience in the psychopathology of cults before anybody would be recruited.

Stage 3: Besides a growing sense of the cult's mission, there emerges the grandiose fantasy that the cult's organization will protect/provide something needed for the world

culture at large. This vision of omnipotence unconsciously tends to temporarily allay the cult members' anxiety about realization of the group fantasy. In our opinion this stage is a preamble to a point of no return in the progression to group death, unless the degree of omnipotence is controlled, by an active intervention to introduce a reasonable not threatening outside reality, as in the case of the Company described...

Stage 4: The leader ever more closely monitors the external boundary of the organization in the guise of protecting the mission of the group, and liberating the creative energies of disciples to spiritually grow and do their own work. This process increases the degree of isolation of members from reality and from diverse view of points outside the group's boundaries. Such retreats from reality encourages passivity, regressive thinking, and a Pollyanna- childlike pairing with the by now emerging omnipotent cult leader. As the distinctions between in-group and out-group behavior are heightened, the out-group is perceived in an increasingly vigilant and paranoid manner.

In the final stages of the inevitable process of "group death", Jones was able to craft and articulate the sharp distinctions between life inside and outside the group's boundaries. This fourth phase we describe as one of extremism and increasing paranoia. The world outside the Jonestown's boundaries (particularly the United States or any capitalist country) was constructed by Jones and his followers to be hostile to the group's existence, as envious of the group's vision of living a utopian and sin-free lifestyle, and thus ultimately determined to destroy it as the enemy. The great tension-arcs created between the hostile outside world and the presumed blessed existence within the group's parameters augmented the groups' need for high drama. It also became the coherent

scaffolding for the group's internal mythology, that ultimately they must be destroyed by the evil forces of the outside world as part of a final cleansing and rite of purification. Thus, the myth required of the community a righteous death, which would confer martyrdom. Through the vernacular of his fiery apocalyptic rhetoric, blended with pseudo-Marxist jargon, Jones became the articulate narrator and myth-creator for the groups' unconscious and incoherent yet zealous longings for their own mini-apocalypse. Jones was exquisitely attuned to the group's requirement that he construct referential symbols that would articulate and give coherence to the group's search for meaning through martyrdom. Jones offered his followers a vision of transcendence and a "Promised Land", a vision often delivered with moments of communal love and shared purpose – all of which took them far beyond the strife of the racist society they had left. Through voluntary death they could preemptively renounce and triumph over the world of evil and achieve immortal acclaim. In the end, if Jones was the group's religious piper, he led the community of the faithful precisely where they had unconsciously directed him to lead them.

Stage 5: The Core Psychotic Fantasy of Group Death and Resurrection. A central component of this final stage- Group Death fantasy- is the masochistic deployment of self- injury and annihilation. The masochistic motivation is to sanctify the self through self-victimization, by projecting the blame for ones suffering onto the evil other (outside the cult boundary). It allows one to punish and murder oneself in order to earn love and recognition from the parent-Jones-God. The libidinal aspect of the aggression is retained as triumphal masochistic excitement, the nature of which resonated clearly in the final White Night Sermon. Through masochistic suffering one derides that which is weak and

extinguishes those unwanted and hated aspects of the self. One becomes a vengeful God to punish ones own loathsome and contemptible self (Bakan, 1971). The fantasy of oneself as god-like serves as an antidote to weakness and self-disgust, as one becomes the dispenser of divine justice acted out against the self and others. The persecutory others are punished as surrogates for a punishing parent who victimized the frail child. Thus, as evinced in Jim Jones' final comments on the audiotape, he slammed home for posterity his most withering existential diatribe as an irrefutable renunciation of the human condition. In his swan song as a "failed-Christ" figure for the group, Jones succeeds in uplifting himself as a revolutionary martyr, too misunderstood and mistreated in the world to tolerate anymore the indignity of living within it.

### **Conclusion**

We have incorporated audio taped transcripts as data from the final White Night sermon at Jonestown to illustrate the particular pairing dynamics that were cultivated and enacted between Jim Jones and his followers, resulting ultimately in masochistic group death for the entire Jonestown commune. The five stages of fantasy embellishments and concomitant behaviors inherent in malignant cult formation here described constitute the tentative theoretical scaffolding of a model to be further developed and empirically validated on other cult cases. We propose in this model a particular sequence and progression of stages that unfold between the leader and followers in the process of malignant cult development. These stages trace the momentum leading initially from the particularized fantasy relationship of masochistic submission and omnipotence between the group and it's leader, ultimately to the behavioral enactment of these fantasy

relationships in group death. In this progression into psychosis, the Christ-like leader is ultimately doomed to fail his followers, setting in motion the group's homicidal rage turned against the leader and themselves. The total absence of contact with wider social reality rendered Jonestown, immersed within the remote jungles of Guyana, a totalistic environment akin to a crystallized delusion system. The stages of this model reflect and reinforce Bion's theories of group regression, and particularly those regarding fantasy embellishments inherent in the pairing basic assumption. Our case example of a financial company illustrated cult formation at an early yet salvageable stage on the continuum of cult development.

We have also observed and amplified the conceptual linkage between malignant cult development and domestic terrorism. Both Jim Jones, and the self-proclaimed American patriots of the Christian Identity Movement, embraced the rhetoric and symbolic imagery of the apocalypse as their centrally organizing and clarion call to destructive action. The aim of the aggression differed between these groups as to whether it was externally or internally directed; and of course, their politics and social values differed radically on issues such as race relations. Yet both groups made comparable appeals to the end-days, and the final catastrophe they anticipated must befall a wicked human kind, with their redemption for loyalty and martyrdom. Such pronouncements are reflective of the rhetoric of the religious fanatic mindset, whether uttered in the jungles of Guyana or from a survivalist retreat in the mountains of Idaho.

Religions of compassion and love have sanctified violent acts historically. However, rather than claiming that religion instructs violence, religions might also be understood as

fantasy systems, many of which validate desired beliefs and actions with divine sanction, truth and authority. Religious fantasy can be pathologically merged we feel, with omnipotent yearnings, which protect the individual from the reality of death, perdition, the terror of the unknown and the precariousness of nature. Through religious systems, security is achieved and followers are assured of a predictable system of meaning and order that deters calamity and assuages anxiety. If there is a question of opposing world-views, then as in the Christian Crusades, sanctification by ones God is the highest authority and renders violent acts in God's name irrefutably righteous. One is absolved of guilt- or evades the possibility of blame- when the group is performing a violent act under the auspices of a God (Arlow, 1964; Freud, 1921). While a religion may not teach violence, what becomes the engine for the final violent stage is the masochistic psychotic fantasy itself, which utilizes, twists or invents a divine sanction to justify what is psychologically motivating the fantasy. For some groups violent fantasies, as opposed to violent actions, may contribute to psychodynamic equilibrium. For others, unfortunately, only violent action will ultimately suffice. In our heightening concern over the prospects of terrorism in the modern world, we are pressed to further understand the pathways by which nascent cults can evolve into malignant ones destined for self-annihilation, developing an organized program of terrorist violence, or both.

### Footnotes

(1) Transcribed Jonestown speeches can be obtained from : The Jonestown Institute, accessed Jan 11, 2004 at: <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/AboutJonestown/Tapes/tapes.htm> .

(2) The total dead came to 913 in Jonestown itself, with four in the nearby city of Georgetown, and five in the party of Congressman Leo Ryan (including Ryan himself). Ryan's group had come to investigate complaints about the cult and had been slain at the Jonestown airport by cult gunmen, known as Jones' Red Guard (shades of Mao). The majority at Jonestown died from a prepared potassium cyanide poison, swallowed in a mixture with grape Flavor-Aid (KoolAid-like drink) or injected. Three people at Jonestown, including Jones himself, were shot. One cult member had slit the throats of three young children before doing the same to herself. According to the first reporter to view the carnage at Jonestown, "many had died with their arms around each other, men and women, white and black, young and old." (Smith, 1982). However, not all the dead at Jonestown were suicides. Over 260 small children died there, and at least 70 adults died of cyanide injections, which suggests they may have resisted drinking the poison mix. One survivor estimated that 30 to 40 adults "objected" and another 100 or so "were reluctant." Distinctions between suicide and murder, therefore, are difficult to make.

(3). The Oxford Companion to the Bible defines Apocalyptic Literature as: "The words 'apocalyptic' and 'apocalypse' (from the Greek root meaning to 'uncover'; 'to reveal') are terms that came to be used from the second century CE onward to indicate a type of Jewish and Christian literature akin to the New Testament Apocalypse (an alternative title of the book of revelation), which gave it's name to this style of writing."

(4.). The Oxford Companion to the Bible defines Armageddon as: "a place name found only in Revelation 16: 16, where it is identified as the "Hebrew" name for the location where the kings of the earth assemble to fight against God. Scholars generally explain Armageddon as a Greek translation of the Hebrew phrase *har megiddo* ("the mountain of Megiddo"). The city of Megiddo, strategically located in the western part of the esdrelon valley at the crossroads of two trade routes, was the site of several important battles in ancient times. The reference to the "mountain" of Megido is, however, more problematic, corresponding to no evident geographical features in the area. Although Armageddon appears only once in the Bible, it has become a familiar destination for the future final battle between the forces of good and evil." (p. 56).

(5) The year 2000 AD, as the year predicted to herald the apocalypse, has assumed greater temporal "elasticity" as this prediction has not been fulfilled; apocalyptic rhetoric

now refers to the year 2000 AD or 'thereabouts'.

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