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A Religious Weapon: Remembering the Jonestown Massacre

A white supremacist, Jim Jones lived his life by strategically misusing words to fool African-Americans that the church he built, the Peoples' Temple, was made for racial equality. In reality, it was nothing but an attempt to seize power during a time marginalized communities had nothing - and more than anything wanted a person to represent them. The Peoples Temple had two main systems of thought- one spreading the general sense of peace and love, meant for the followers of the church; and the other the belief Jim Jones and select leadership believed in - redeeming humanity would mean to start all over. (What were the Beliefs). Throughout this paper, I intend to expose his points, especially those found in the "Death Tape." Found through a digital archive holding content from photos to articles, dubbed "Jonestown & Peoples Temple," it holds many different variations of content, all while I decide to specialize on the transcript of the tape. The "Death Tape," specifically the transcript because the audio is unintelligible, provides the last forty or so minutes of Jonestown before Jim Jones manages to convince 900+ people to drink poison, ending their lives before government officials can stop him. I seek a fundamental understanding of how religious vocabulary and how Jim Jones's charisma was able to convince people into drinking the poison, ending not only their incomplete lives but their children's lives, most of which started at this island. **The power of Jim Jones relied on his ability to blend religious language with American ideals to distort the truth. Through his**

charisma, he manipulated their isolation into an innovative ‘revolution,’ convincing his followers they were on a bold movement, instead actually forcing them into a single way of thinking.

My paper will delve specifically into language analysis, analyzing the Biblical references to the quotes he chooses to use in his speech. Convincing those with families to allow their children to follow through with the plan is a grim point found in the death tape, and strikes debates among children and religious involvement. Further analysis of the ‘Death Tape’ will fulfill the claim that Jim Jones managed to bound the followers of his church in misplaced belief. Not only that, but it is unfortunate that the majority of the church’s following were discretely oppressed. As this tragedy was before 9/11, reasoning follows that most of society seems to forget this mass casualty and just how many died with lives improperly taken due to one man’s goals for complete power. Jim Jones sought out a world of isolation for his followers, conjured through money and connections made in Los Angeles. This prolific growth of the church, as well as finding a place in the world mostly disconnected from society, was ideal when looking to create helplessness and misjudged confidence.

Jim Jones’ entire method, starting from his sanctimonious views to his charismatic allure while in Jonestown, is what helped him sell his reasoning so well (Botha). Botha, while not personally afflicted by the massacre, notes feelings of injustice in the form of recognition. For him, the fact that the leader is more highlighted than the many affected by his manipulation is astounding and simply unjust. It is moments like these that complete the reasoning behind this paper, that prove a situation as covert as this, requires awareness and transparency. It represents justice in the form of redemption, as the leader’s rhetorical tactics, once spotted, can prevent another event occurring (Jonestown Massacre).

Jones had credibility before starting up the People's Temple. As much as I would want to critique the followers, his followers had no reason to question his authority. Jim Jones was cleared by Rosalynn Carter, a respected humanitarian, who did not suspect Jones of any mental illness-on the contrary, wrote letters in support of his proposal to give aid to Cuba (Szasz). Jim Jones was revered by government officials and lawyers alike and considered him 'normal'. One of Jones' lawyers, Charles Garry, describes Jones' settlement in Guyana to be 'a beautiful jewel,' though after he finds out about the massacre, calls Jones 'stark raving mad,' (Szasz). If his lawyer was found to have this belief before the fateful day, he would be under severe scrutiny for violating his rights as a lawyer, and as a human being with morals. The believers of the People's Temple shared both loyalty and commitment. As they had already followed Jim Jones to Jonestown, it was clear that anything he was to say would be received well and incorporated into their lifestyle in their isolated world. The people who followed Jones into Jamestown had autonomy, and while most agreed with their choice of moving, some had soon regretted their choice, having doubts. As government officials became suspicious and doubts began to spread, Jones felt time was running out. This growing pressure in Guyana is what ultimately sparked his speech.

Jones knew that once some expressed their discomfort and left his curated safe haven, it was only a matter of time until others began to realize that prophecy was less than their wellbeing. When outlining his final piece of asserting excessive control, Jim Jones uses the phrase, "how very much I've loved you," to provide a blanket of credibility in the beginning of the speech that will guarantee their trust (Serial-973.PDF). One of the easiest ways to persuade an audience is through placing yourself to their level, and Jim Jones sought to be their 'best

friend,' less of a pastor but more of a person that was easy to rely on, as well as a man who sought out their best interests (Pehanick).

Another way Jim Jones reinforced integrity when speaking to his audience was a consistent reference to the Bible. Interpretation of the biblical phrases Jim Jones uses is compared to the context found in the transcript and actual Biblical interpretation, to view how exactly Jones is able to misconstrue a general idea Christians all believe in. Despite a personal lack of belief in a deity, Jim Jones utilized religious verses to influence a group that remained largely unaware of his private skepticism (Young, 1979). “No man lay – takes my life from me; I lay my life down,” is a reference to the verse, John 10:17. With a direct comparison to the intention written in the Bible, Jesus is claiming to be the sole legitimate means of salvation of mankind (John 10:17). This corroborates with Jones’ ideas in the temple, that for mankind to be renewed we must completely wipe it out. In this context, he uses it as an urgency to end their lives-the quicker the possible. After giving many false promises, the final one is their independence in this decision. It should be assumed that Jim Jones is trying to compare himself to Jesus in this sense-as another controversial point about this verse is that no mortal would be able to die and resurrect themselves again.

Up until this point, individual autonomy within the group remained secondary to the exercise of collective religious liberty. By juxtaposing pastoral reassurance with scriptural reasoning for self-sacrifice, Jones presented this as an accomplishment of collective liberty. Instead of a verse held sacred to the heart, it is a weapon, guarding any sort of contradictions found further in his speech. Another verse stated simply after was Matthew 11:12, “The world –

the kingdom suffereth violence and the violent shall take it by force.” The direct interpretation draws to the fact ‘the violent’ are taking their heavenly kindgom (Jonestown) by force (preventing the suicide from occuring) (Matthew 11:12). This is alluding to the impending truth that his cherished town will soon be exposed for nothing more than a seize of power. By emphasizing social justice and racial equality, the leader categorized the collective departure as an act of liberty. The ideas he spread throughout his church mirrored utilitarian principles, and that in order to achieve the life he sought for his people they would have to find and create their own land (Jonestown). To Jim Jones, not only would inducing a mass sacrifice go down in history, but it would also deny him of any real accountability.

Opposing phases invite confused, yet concurring opinions from the audience backing up Jim Jones. His most repeated phrase throughout the transcript is the phrase ‘revolutionary act’. Words like these invoke patriotism, ironic enough because it is the most correlated with American ideals but the people in the church were so fed up with this that they moved themselves across the globe. Most infamously, during the “Death Tape” he states “we are not committing suicide: it’s a revolutionary act” (Serial-973.PDF). If it is not the revolutionary act, it is the revolutionary suicide, the revolutionary struggle, as a concept as morbid as this has never been spread by churches before. As if that concept was not revolutionary itself, I think using a word that evokes feelings of transition and exciting change was ingenious for Jim Jones’ tactics. Especially when rallying voices stemming from different cultural backgrounds, some more unwilling to sacrifice themselves for a religion, takes extreme measures to convince people. For Jones, this was the word revolutionary - and that is exactly what the Jonestown massacre was, for reasons speculated. Although the audio was unclear, I can detect Jones’ cadence in the speech. I

can sense an inflection when he juxtaposes the word ‘revolutionary’ to ‘suicide,’; the tone shift in his voice could potentially mirror joy when he is accepted by the masses to enact his plan.

I want to highlight some of the different voices found in the transcript. To begin to find justice in a case as convoluted as this, it should be found in spreading the names and the memories tied to the people involved. As much as I tend to highlight Jim Jones and his conniving ways of gathering support, in no way am I trying to spread information without including his wicked method of massacre. Instead, I want to emphasize the voices that spoke up during the last moments. They explain lines of reasoning combatting the jargon and reasoning as a community they are used to—a voice in particular opposes Jones, and had potential, with enough supporters, to question why self-sacrifice was the most logical route. The general audience had already been convinced of moving to an isolated place in South America, so their compliance was expected.

But for some, the idea of killing children and ending their own lives presented itself to be such an ethical issue some in the audience could not immediately begin to accept. This friction requires exploring divergent perspectives to highlight the tension between religious commitment and critical thinking. By presenting these opposing views, this paper examines whether faith functions as a liberating force or a psychological constraint when loyalty demands the sacrifice of a child’s autonomy. Analyzing these perspectives interrogates the boundary between individual liberty and collective authority. The most notable example of this is Chrstisine Miller, who based on the transcript reads as a mind of reason. Miller starts to question how thought out this plan is, by first suggesting going to Russia instead of leaving this land in an immoral way (Bellefontaine). Jones swears he is reaching out to Russia, sending officials to question Russia

about migration, when in actuality he has no intention of doing such a thing. As unfortunate as it is for his speech, Christine has proven to him time and time again the last thing she will be is consistent with the rest of the followers. She resembles an atypical follower, not particularly swayed by American idealism and biblical references. Later, when Jones introduces the concept of collective family deaths, Miller directs the inquiry toward Jones's own son, John. By asking, "You mean you wanna see John die?" (Q042 Transcript), Miller forces a confrontation between Jones's personal ethics and his communal directives. Jones responds by stating he does not privilege his child above any other member, aligning his private family role with the Temple's doctrines. However, this position creates a functional conflict with the traditional family values the Peoples Temple publicly advocated (Smith), suggesting that communal loyalty was not intended to surpass biological ties.

As Miller continuously attempts to push back from immediately accepting her fate, another voice jumps in: Mary Darden. "I said hope is lost, let's die, we dying anyway" (Q042 Transcript). A voice of exasperation, she mirrors that of a person sick of argument and while still static, not defensive. She accepts her outcome with ease, speaking again to say "Dad, we're all ready to go" (Serial-973.PDF). The concept of addressing and accepting the label of family creates a bond based on trust and intimate connection, something Jim Jones' followers strongly believe in. She can resemble the majority of followers - aware but ignorant. At this point, with fallacies of family values and self sacrifice can begin to raise flags in the followers, but just as Darnden's attitude suggests, she is not devastated or invested in her own life enough to make an outburst. It could be the helplessness that Jones intended to foster in his world, giving her and others a sense of despair.

As Jim Jones asserts different ideas of accepting the end of life, Irene Edwards concludes the different speakers with a joyous outlook on death, and all that Jim Jones has done. In a way, the majority agreeing compels the argument, as flawed as it is, to have sense. Irene praises Jones in such a way it would be unethical to disagree and not support her line of reasoning. “He is avant garde” (Serial-973.PDF). A visionary, their idol, the maker of a safehaven, Jim Jones by the end of the transcript has managed to convince more of the audience than successfully have those like Miller resist sacrifice.

Throughout this paper, I have used interpretations of the Bible in Jim Jones’ context, raised awareness about many discriminated voices, challenged the ethicality of the tape itself, and tried to find a line of reasoning among Jones’ motives and why it worked so well among his audience. Jim Jones sought to make history-which he did, it has just been diminished to him and his life rather than the many souls who lost their lives during this. The primary objective of this paper is to reconstruct the final hour of the Jonestown massacre, specifically examining the suffering of the children and the overall scale of the event. Researching this topic evokes a profound sense of frustration and sorrow regarding the human cost of the tragedy. Access to digital archives has provided the necessary evidence-ranging from photographs to contemporary articles-to facilitate a detailed analysis of how misplaced belief and charismatic authority can be leveraged to catastrophic ends.

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