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Divine Materiality

Peoples Temple and Messianic Theologies of Incarnation and Reincarnation

Holly Folk

ABSTRACT: This article uses archival research and personal interviews with former Peoples Temple members to explore the related ideas of incarnation and reincarnation—divine materiality—as developed and taught by Jim Jones in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Peoples Temple. Jones was combinative in his understanding of his own incarnation and belief in reincarnation. He borrowed from faith healers, incorporated ideas from both New Thought and Asian religions, and found biblical justifications for his theology. Peoples Temple members accepted a variety of theological options, in what I have termed “experiential pluralism,” to indicate the lack of a monolithic belief system. Despite this experiential pluralism, however, reincarnation theology knit Peoples Temple members together into a community.

KEYWORDS: Peoples Temple, incarnation, reincarnation, heterodoxy, heterodox Christianity, Jim Jones, Jonestown

The idea of “incarnation” derives from traditional Christian theology, and refers to the carnal embodiment of God through Jesus Christ. Unlike human bodies, whose flesh is associated with sinfulness, Christ’s incarnation is seen as important for the work of salvation, and for making possible a loving relationship with the

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savior. Divine incarnation is seldom extended to the rest of humanity, however. It is a quality of the “divine man,” the human who is deified yet remains both flesh as well as spirit. While the soul of the individual Christian may be divinized, Christ alone is the incarnate Son of God; no other being has this status. Reincarnation, in contrast, posits the survival of identity through successive lifetimes. Several major religious traditions of the world and many indigenous religions have beliefs in metempsychosis, transmigration of souls, or some form of rebirth. In Buddhism and Hinduism, reincarnation is connected to the concept of karma (Sanskrit, “action”), with both ideas supporting the notion of a cosmic law of cause and effect that causes rebirth according to one’s intentions and actions.

Reincarnation is understood somewhat differently in metaphysical religions, a set of nineteenth- and twentieth-century spiritual movements that include New Thought and New Age belief systems. Metaphysical religions hold that there is a spiritual reality behind the material world, and a relationship between human and divine consciousness.¹ Channeling of spiritual entities and reincarnation are both popular ideas; adherents of these alternative spiritualities often find self-actualization in the narratives comprised through past lives.²

Christian new religions that espouse either a new divine incarnation or reincarnation depart from mainstream doctrine. Yet many of these new religions have invoked incarnation and reincarnation to validate the exceptional spiritual status of their leaders, some of whom are recognized not just as prophets but as physical manifestations of the divine. Kimbanguism in Africa, the Shakers in the United States, Victory Altar Church in South Korea, and the King of Salem churches in Latin America attest that this is a global phenomenon.³

This article draws on archival research in materials available from the California Historical Society in San Francisco and the Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple website managed by The Jonestown Institute,⁴ and personal interviews with former Peoples Temple members, along with reflection papers written by Temple survivors. Four of the interviews were conducted by telephone, and one was in person. One survivor asked not to be identified by name, and is referred to anonymously.

Peoples Temple exemplifies the interplay and actualization of theologies of spiritualized physicality. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Jim Jones developed a theology of divine materiality that included concepts of both incarnation and reincarnation. An abundant historical record for Peoples Temple and Jonestown shows the context in which these ideas were taught, developed, and, for some members, sustained. Equally important, the diverse perspectives of Peoples Temple members and survivors illustrate how these beliefs were refracted into separate meanings by religious actors with differing apprehensions. In both

respects, Peoples Temple offers a rich case for the study of theological creativity and hybridity in new religious movements. In addition, researching the propagation and reception of these beliefs shows their meaning in the life of the community and illuminates the highly personal understanding of religious ideas.

EXPERIENTIAL PLURALISM IN PEOPLES TEMPLE

Assessing theology in Peoples Temple is complex. Jim Jones was combinative in his understanding of his own incarnation and belief in reincarnation, incorporating ideas from both New Thought and Asian religions, and also finding biblical justifications. Shifts in beliefs over time, different perspectives of Temple members, and the fact that Jones himself made conflicting and dissembling statements about his beliefs mean there is no single perspective that should be regarded as definitive.

The members of Peoples Temple were of diverse backgrounds in terms of race, age, religion, and social class. There were three important constituencies: 1) members from the original church in Indianapolis founded in the 1950s, who were mostly working class white and black Christians with roots in Pentecostalism; 2) young adult converts who joined in California in the late 1960s and 1970s, who were mostly white and often college-educated; and 3) African Americans from California's cities, who, like the Indiana members, joined in family groups in the 1970s.⁵ In Peoples Temple, theology was apprehended differently by people attracted to New Age culture or paranormal studies, people who did not care much about religion, ardent socialists hostile to Christianity, and committed Christians from many denominations and church traditions—from Methodist to Baptist, from Pentecostal to Holiness—who struggled to accept reincarnation as a doctrine but often were devoted to Jones as a prophet and savior.

There is great ambivalence among both scholars and survivors about the depth of religious belief in Peoples Temple. Some feel that in later years the group maintained the appearance of a church only to please outsiders. While in San Francisco and later in Guyana, Peoples Temple embraced more ardently a socialist message that was sometimes understood within a Christian framework as “apostolic socialism.”⁶ Many of the newer converts who were white and college-educated—and who disproportionately served on the Planning Commission, the Temple's administrative body—were more receptive to the atheistic communism proposed by Marx and implemented in the Soviet Union than to Christianity. Don Beck, a Temple survivor, recollected how these viewpoints were brought together:

The theology of PT was to abolish theology. The closest Christian model might be an apostolic socialist one, based in the Acts of the Apostles, selling all possessions, sharing in common, etc., but moving far beyond the religious base. . . . Perhaps it is more appropriate to speak of a PT ideology rather than a theology. Even the “metaphysical” was seen as a sidebar. Our intention—our “ministry,” if you will—was to forget metaphor and act now. We focused on building a heaven on earth by the way we treated each other and worked with each other to make a better place to live for us and our children, to give them a better place to live than we had been born into.⁷

Jordan Vilchez characterized the shift in this way: Peoples Temple was religious in its intensity to “the Cause” but came to oppose conventional religion.⁸ Many members were asked to create appearances of religion that they personally did not share. Garrett Lambrev and the writers of *The Living Word* were tasked with creating a Christian periodical, and ordered to conceal their affinities to socialism.⁹ Neva Sly Hargrave feels that members were pressured to glorify Jim Jones publicly, partly to appeal to a contingent of followers of Father Divine (George Baker, 1877–1965) who joined Peoples Temple after 1971.¹⁰ It is hard to imagine anyone being an enthusiastic participant in the healings that were staged.¹¹ People in the inner circle such as Laura Kohl felt that Jim Jones presented a “façade” of traditional religiosity to give himself legitimacy.¹² Yet for rank-and-file members, Christian commitment was genuine.

Even in later years the community continued to promote a variety of religious messages. In the United States, Peoples Temple constructed the image of being a progressive denominational church, one infused with the communitarian spirit of midwestern evangelicalism. Peoples Temple Christian Church Full Gospel affiliated with the Disciples of Christ in 1959, and the group continued to identify with the denomination after moving to California, where they operated as Peoples Temple of the Disciples of Christ.¹³ To some, this plurality throws the authenticity of the religious messages into question. I believe another option is to realize that the different versions were subjectively true for participants. Peoples Temple simultaneously proclaimed a secular socialist message and maintained a framework of Christianity that outsiders, and arguably many of the members themselves, believed. Whether this edifice was a solid construction or a stage set depended on the angle from which it was viewed.

Peoples Temple shows how multiple teachings can be in circulation in a new religion. This can be the result of rapid doctrinal change, or different personal interpretations. Sometimes leaders selectively present different truths to their constituencies. In Peoples Temple, members had different levels of awareness about the group’s operations. Many, if not most, were not aware of the stagecraft behind Jim Jones’ elaborate faith healings, while some members were compelled into participating.

The analysis of religion in Peoples Temple is greatly helped, I believe, by a framework that can accommodate conflicting and changing points of view. I have come to regard Peoples Temple as manifesting what I call “experiential pluralism.” In other words, the movement was intrinsically heterogeneous.

Members had different understandings of Peoples Temple as religious or secular, and survivors have different recollections of Jonestown. There even is disagreement among survivors about how much religion was discussed in Peoples Temple. Some former members maintain religion was not talked about because it was not important.¹⁴ Others recall dramatic limits on communication that kept people from speaking about anything they personally felt important.¹⁵ Some feel Jones’ “owned” spirituality—that he controlled the dominant discourse, discouraging any possible rivalry through spiritual innovation.¹⁶ Others saw personal interpretations as allowed, and appreciated that people had many different religious backgrounds.¹⁷

The Temple encompassed several parallel religious traditions. For some members, it was presented and functioned as a Pentecostal church and healing ministry. Its direct mail included offers of prayer cloths, anointing oil, and blessed pennies.¹⁸ At other times, the church intentionally used theology and vocabulary from the Social Gospel, a liberal Protestant social reform movement from the Progressive Era in the United States (1890s–1920s), to present the Temple as a this-worldly combatant of injustice and oppression. Some survivors have described Jim Jones as entrepreneurial in his religious outreach, innovatively trying whatever might “work” with a new constituency.¹⁹ This is evident in the diverse content of the *Peoples Forum*, a newsletter published by the Temple between 1976 and 1978. The *Peoples Forum* made appeals to an array of religious and secular constituencies, drawing connections to Libertarianism and Communism, to conspiracy theories and parapsychology, and to faith healing and empirical science. Different issues of the *Peoples Forum* announced that “Vitamin C Clears Up Cancer” and celebrated the “Millions Spent on Psychic Research” as a sign of spiritual and intellectual progress; but the serial also warned against encroaching government power in articles like “It Could Happen Here!” and “Freedom of the Press,” and “The Rise & Fall of the Third Wave” (an article about neofascism that likened the racism and totalitarian mentality in the United States to Nazi Germany).²⁰

Jim Jones attracted many followers because people felt he had unusual spiritual capacities. Don Beck saw Jim Jones as a figure “like Edgar Cayce”—someone with a high degree of metaphysical insight.²¹ In explaining his determination to follow Jones, Harold Cordell wrote:

He is a prophet of the first degree whose prophecies always come true to the minute detail. . . . James Jones is certainly a deliverer and the same

Anointed Spirit or Christ spirit that we know resided in Jesus. [He is] one of the greatest prophets and messengers that have ever appeared on this earth.²²

On the other hand, some former members question whether Jones ever believed in Christianity at all. One of the strongest voices of this perspective is Laura Johnston Kohl, who maintains:

I do not see Jim as a devoutly religious man. As a young man who wanted power, he saw religion as his vehicle, and he made his public persona as a Man of God. He had decided upon that as a means to his goal. The very first person to learn that he not only didn't believe in God, but that he had no core belief in any God, was his wife Marceline Jones, a devout Methodist. That was a well-kept secret between the two of them, and possibly a small circle of friends, for many, many years.

But the reality is, Jim's earliest and most consistent lie was that he was a "Man of God."²³

Kohl echoes a perspective maintained by some scholars and many anti-cult activists—that Jim Jones was a calculating manipulator who used Christianity against people who believed in it.²⁴

Experiential pluralism mainly describes a collective religious setting, but there is a parallel phenomenon of internal variation within people. Having a belief does not mean having it all the time—sometimes one feels doubt. Further, people can believe different things in tension with each other. Several Temple members I spoke with maintained enduring uncertainty about Jones' spiritual persona, ambivalence being possibly the strongest shared sentiment to emerge in the interviews. One person said, "I am on the very edge between my own belief and disbelief."²⁵

The variety of messages promoted by Jim Jones meant that Peoples Temple offered several religious options for members. It was possible to take certain ideas metaphorically, or even discount their importance, seeing the parts of Jones' message that one wanted to see in much sharper relief. Despite the demand for absolute commitment to its socialist ideology and communitarian lifestyle, Peoples Temple allowed spiritual diversity among members. This should guide our thinking not only about this particular group but about this possibility within other new religions.

JIM JONES' THEOLOGY OF MESSIANIC INCARNATION

Possibly the most striking example of non-linearity of the worldview in Peoples Temple is Jim Jones himself. His faith and doubt each were, I think, situationally cultivated and occasionally disrupted. To most of the public and many of his followers, it would seem that Jones began as

the leader of an activist Christian ministry, and that he shifted toward socialism later on. Given his capacity for duplicity, it is possible that Jones did not believe in his apotheosis or claims of past lives, but there is great reason to think he did. Against arguments that he only used religion to attract members is the possibility that Jones' skillful presentation of diverse ideologies led him to highlight the secularism of his message to less religiously oriented Temple members, while privately believing in his apotheosis.

Marxism and messianism were interwoven in Jones' ambitions right from the start. Author Jeff Guinn traced several of Jones' ideas back to his mother, Lynetta Putnam Jones (1902–1977), who believed in reincarnation from the time she was a teenager and held that her son had an exceptional spiritual destiny foretold to her in a vision while she was pregnant. Guinn also identifies Lynetta as the source of Jones' ideas about a "sky god," an imaginary deity in Christianity into which people put false hopes.²⁶

Jim Jones' ideology of messianic embodiment can be traced to his encounters with two religious figures: William Marrion Branham (1909–1956), an Indiana evangelist associated with the Latter Rain Revival, and Father Divine, founder of the International Peace Mission movement. William Branham has been identified as an influence on Jim Jones' faith healings. Branham's Jeffersonville, Indiana, church was geographically close to Jones' ministry in Indianapolis, and in the 1950s Jones sought out the faith healer for cooperative ventures.²⁷ In June 1956, Jones organized a religious convention, with Branham as the headliner. Branham often used the phrase "God in a body." Branham preached:

When God (it so pleased the Father, God, the Spirit, to raise up his own Son) overshadowed Mary by the Holy Spirit and brought forth a body that could serve Him and serve his purpose. . . . The—God was in Christ, the fullness of the Godhead bodily, in Him reflecting what God was to the people, letting the whole world know what God wanted each individual to be: a son and daughter. He took one man and did it. . . . He was the manifestation of God. He was God in a body form, to reflect the Word of God for that age, to make that age see God's promise for that age.²⁸

This theological connection is worth probing more, but despite his cooperation in the Healing Revival, years later Jones disparaged Branham to Peoples Temple members. He asserted that Branham's Christianity had always been a fraud, and he scoffed at the evangelist's powers of prediction after Branham's death in a car accident.²⁹

There was much in Father Divine's Peace Mission, however, for Jim Jones to admire. It was an interracial religious movement whose members lived communally and espoused a communitarian Christian theology oriented to social welfare. In fact, Jones' emulation of Father Divine started remarkably early, soon after their meeting in 1956. In the

following years Jones made several visits to Woodmont, Father Divine's estate outside Philadelphia.³⁰ In 1959, he oversaw the publication of a pamphlet entitled, "Pastor Jim Jones Meets Rev. M. J. Divine." Jones' motive can be read in the pamphlet's subtitle: "How a pastor of a large full gospel assembly was more consecrated to Jesus Christ by his contact with the Rev. M. J. Divine Peace Mission movement."³¹ The enlistment of believers in social action was central to Jones' interest in the Peace Mission, but how he felt about Father Divine's claims to be God is not completely clear. In a sermon dating possibly to 1957 or 1958, Jones challenged the leader's deification and simultaneously admired Father Divine's charismatic ability to motivate his followers for social causes.

My precious friends at the Peace [Mission], under the leadership of the Great Master, Father Divine, believe in the immortality of the body. . . . [Even with] their false worship of a person, with their deification of a man, and I've seen them stand for six hours and praise God. I've seen them go out in the highways and hedges, and work and minister to people that were down and out, and downtrodden. I've seen them live above sensuality, I've seen them live above their families.³²

Jones tried to recruit from the Peace Mission as early as the late 1950s; in the sermon above he mentions sending them tapes of his own messages. In the 1960s, Jones began to cultivate his own identity as a prophet and potential incarnation of God. E. Black, a researcher who writes under a pseudonym, understands incarnation theology as having helped both Father Divine and Jim Jones to establish and legitimate their respective authority. "One of their most effective means of doing so was to replace the mythos of the Christian Jesus with a new mythos based on the manufactured reality of their respective divine lives and special powers."³³

Jim Jones also drew on Father Divine's blend of Christianity and New Thought philosophy. Father Divine's followers referred to him as "the Messenger, God in the Sonship Degree."³⁴ Father Divine understood himself to have "Personified God Consciousness"; he was "God in a body."³⁵ These terms resonate in Jones' own theology of incarnation. Noting that Father Divine came to believe in his own divinity through a predecessor, Samuel Morris or "Father Jehovia," Black writes, "All three taught that they were *bodily* incarnations of the *true* God—not the false, mythical 'Sky God' of the traditional versions—and that this 'God' was *principle*, and that that principle was *eternal* and *divine*. This very same 'Divine principle' could be—and *must* be—personified, embodied, reincarnated and perfected in others."³⁶

E. Black believes that meeting Father Divine inspired Jones' private aspirations for deification throughout the 1960s. His ambitions became more public in 1971, when Jones brought a bus caravan of Temple members to the Peace Mission in Philadelphia.³⁷ Ostensibly this was for

a fellowship visit, but Jones' desire to recruit members of the Peace Mission to Peoples Temple, after Father Divine's death in 1965, was revealed in comments he made at a communal dinner.³⁸ Jones did not specifically say he was the reincarnation of Father Divine, but he intimated that Father Divine had "contacted" him from the Spirit World, giving the impression of a relationship that gave him rights to succession. Temple survivor Hargrave remembers Jones announcing that Divine had told him to "Take care of his flock."³⁹ This proved too much for Mother Divine (Edna Rose Phillips Baker, 1925–2017), who had succeeded her late husband in leading the Woodmont community. Though known by the sobriquet "Sweet Angel," Mother Divine showed a forceful character in unequivocally rejecting Jones' claims of inheriting Father Divine's spiritual legacy and persona. Jones' message resonated with some of Divine's followers, however, who heeded Jones' invitation to leave with him on the buses returning to California. Though the actual number is unknown, between twenty and forty Peace Mission members eventually joined Peoples Temple.⁴⁰

Survivors observe that at this time, Jones also put increasing pressure on people to call him "Father" or "Dad."⁴¹ Jones was cautious in his statements, rarely making direct assertions as to his divinity. He claimed not to be able to understand the sources of the mysterious powers that he, as a passive observer, saw himself emanating. Here, it is worth noting the similarity of Jones' deliberate ambiguity in relation to other new Christian movements, for it can be difficult to determine a leader's intended metaphysical status. Messianic figures often are cautious in making direct statements about their divine status or the nature of their incarnation, with the information sometimes only revealed as an advanced teaching. The doctrine itself may change, and as it does, the group may start to deny incarnation or reincarnation as teachings and reject the leader. For example, in theory the Unification Church rejects reincarnation, though Sun Myung Moon (1920–2012) sometimes asserted he was the returned Jesus.⁴² In the Nigerian Brotherhood of the Cross and Star, Olumba Olumba Obu (1918–2003?) did not usually make direct claims about his status as the second incarnation of Jesus. Rather, he used phrases like "I and the Father are One," from the Gospel of John in a manner quite similar to Jim Jones.⁴³

Several distinct Christian ideas resonate in the claims to present-day divinity made by messianic leaders. To speak of Christ's "Second Appearing" appeals to millennial expectation. The "Christ Within" alludes to divine immanence. The concept of divine incarnation presents a god who takes material form in order to relate to human beings or to resolve existential problems, such as sin and mortality. While these notions are important to Christian theology generally, for Christian new religions they are important theological precedents for explaining how a living person can become a god. The theological justifications of Jones'

divinity resemble those of other new Christianities that promote a broad theology of divine materiality: God manifests God's self in human "flesh" in order to accomplish an important religious work.

Jim Jones' own understanding of his exceptional spiritual status evolved from being a prominent church leader, to prophet, to messiah. As his aspirations grew, Jones made more explicit statements about his spiritual exceptionalism. In 1972 he preached, "when I get up and tell you that I am here, representing the very highest manifestation of God, I am here demonstrating the Word made flesh. . . . You need apostles, pastors, teachers, prophets, evangelists for the perfecting of the saints. You can't get perfected without a spokesman from heaven."⁴⁴ Jones' theology of incarnation, like the views of Branham, posited a Christ Spirit who needed to dwell in a human being to understand human experience and to be accessible for humanity. In a sermon delivered in 1973 Jones announced that,

[i]n Scripture, the gifts that came, that were imparted by the laying on of hands, God has to be incarnate in a body to express his gifts. So you remember when the Scripture spoke of receiving gifts by the laying on of hands? Even the gift of God comes through someone being a vessel of the Spirit.⁴⁵

By invoking the "Christ Within," Jim Jones used language that was familiar to many New Age Christians, for whom the phrase was symbolic of a modern redefinition of the Savior. In metaphysical spirituality, the "inner Christ" often is understood as a principle of sacred power, over and above an anthropomorphic God.⁴⁶ It is worth noting that Jones framed his spiritual activities within the laws of science with the phrase "sane spiritual healing service," as it appeared through years of Temple publications.⁴⁷

His divine incarnation was also important for Jones' understanding of social justice. It emphasized God in the human, everyday world of social action over otherworldly concerns. And it offered a model of and for self-sacrifice and devotion to apostolic socialism. Jones preached, "I have put on Christ, you see. I have followed after the example of Christ. When you see me. . . . That's the mystery. It's no longer Jim Jones here. I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I but Christ that lives here."⁴⁸

A sermon from 1973 illustrates how Jones connected incarnation to his millennial vision, asserting that God always had a body and always will. Quoting Matthew 28:20 he declared,

"[Jesus] said, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world," . . . I will not leave you nor forsake you, never, no never. All may change, but Jesus never, heaven and earth may pass away, but my Word

shall not pass away. . . . My Word, the divine economy of socialism, God is here to stay. It's had a body forever, and it always will have a body.⁴⁹

Lambrev observes that in the 1970s there was more pressure within the Temple to acknowledge Jones as an incarnation either of Father Divine or ultimately of Christ, which coincided with Jones' outreach to the Peace Mission.⁵⁰ In 1972, Peoples Temple launched a new publication—*The Living Word*—a religious magazine marketed to Pentecostal Christians and members of the Peace Mission. Jim Jones gave the publication its name as way to promote the idea of a God-in-the-Body over a “Sky God.”⁵¹ He was eager to develop a vehicle upholding a new Christian incarnationism to support his messianic claims. *The Living Word* proclaimed that Jones had exceptional spiritual capacities. He was identified as a “channel for the Spoken Word,” an allusion to both Branham and Father Divine, who each had serials entitled *The Spoken Word*. Without naming Jones the messiah, the articles offered a theological justification for his incarnation. “By manifesting His Greatest Infinite Supernatural Presence through our beloved Pastor, Jim Jones, Christ is here and now renewing the people's minds and bodies with that New Life; and He is doing it here in Redwood Valley.”⁵²

The sincerity of this annunciation reveals how religion was handled in Peoples Temple. *The Living Word* was designed to appeal to believing Christians outside Peoples Temple, and those members of the group who were not part of the inner circle. By the time *The Living Word* was created, Peoples Temple was transitioning to a secular socialist ideology. The original editor of *The Living Word*, Lambrev, reports that the staff were instructed not to mention politics, especially Marxism. “As a writer, I would confine myself to generalities about our good works, and reinforce them with ample biblical quotations, preferably lifted from the New Testament.”⁵³ Lambrev felt the entire publication was in some ways a sham. Yet its message was true for members who believed in Jones' divinity and who sought to believe this in a Christian idiom. A layered presentation of religion continued to operate even while the Temple reoriented toward secular socialism.

The first issue of *The Living Word* reprinted a sermon that Jones had delivered in Seattle, entitled “The Kingdom of God is Within,” in which Jones announced, “[I] have made Christ real to those who are ready for the Sonship ministry. I have come to demonstrate to you that God can abide in these temples of clay, that God can reign in our bodies, for we are, indeed, Temples of the Holy Ghost!”⁵⁴ Apart from this column, Jones did not write articles for the journal, but he directed the editorial content. In *The Living Word*, “Sonship” was promoted by Marceline LeTourneau, a Pentecostal woman from Indiana who followed Peoples Temple to California (not to be confused with Jones' wife Marceline Baldwin). Jim Jones took the terminologies of “God in

a Body” and “Sonship” from Father Divine.⁵⁵ In “Sons of God,” LeTourneau wrote, “God is Spirit and has always had a Body. All His authority is now available to mankind, because God is working today through our beloved Pastor, Jim Jones.”⁵⁶

REINCARNATION IN PEOPLES TEMPLE

Reincarnation has not been deeply considered as a theme in Peoples Temple. With a few important exceptions, most scholarship has been limited to mentioning Jones’ claims about being Lenin or Jesus. Yet reincarnation was widely discussed, and figures into the Peoples Temple narrative in startling ways. For many members, reincarnation ideas were an important part of the fabric of Temple religious life. It is clear that reincarnation connected to some of the most controversial ideas circulating in Peoples Temple, including Jones’ divinity.

As an adult Jones developed a this-worldly soteriology that could address human problems on earth. The fusion of sacred and secular soteriologies was manifest as early as 1962, during Jones’ sojourn in Brazil. Bonnie Thielmann (1945–2017), an unofficially adopted daughter of the Jones’ family, describes a conversation in which Jim and Marceline revealed to her they had been Ikhnaton and Nefertiti in previous lifetimes, and that Bonnie had been their daughter. Thielmann reports that she had been reading about reincarnation on her own shortly before this conversation, something Jones may have known. Jones made other startling disclosures, telling the teenage girl he had lived before as Jesus, Buddha, and Vladimir Lenin. Soon after that, Jones gave Thielmann an introductory book on communism.⁵⁷

I do not think Jones was lying to Bonnie Thielmann, whose memoir helps establish the long duration of Jones’ spiritual ideas. On the contrary, he desperately needed external validation and ratification of his divine mission. Jones knew the idea of being a god was deviant—something he could not risk being publicly known, and which he knew better than to assume followers would readily accept. Years later he told Temple members at Jonestown not to reveal this information to visitors who would be skeptical.⁵⁸ The faked healings show Jones was willing to trick people to induce them into believing in his supernatural power, but like the early disclosure to Thielmann, they were part of a broad push in Jones’ ministry to support his apotheosis.

Within the context of the layered religiosity in Peoples Temple, Jim Jones cultivated several theological personas. It might be better to think of him promoting *theologies of divine materiality*. While Jones sometimes found biblical evidence for these ideas, in other situations he cited Edgar Cayce (1877–1945), the American clairvoyant known for having performed past-life regression readings.⁵⁹ In sermons, church services,

and meetings, Jones and Temple members discussed reincarnation and karma, sometimes connecting these ideas to Christianity or parapsychology.⁶⁰ For metaphysically-oriented believers, especially, reincarnation was a plausible vehicle for Jones' prophetic status. Jones taught that reincarnation could be proven by experiments, and offered a supportive, "scientific" explanation for spiritual phenomena: "We could go on with scripture after scripture and the proof provided by modern scientific studies in age regression through hypnotherapy which have proven that people were taken back before the time of their birth and provide a documented descriptions of former lives."⁶¹ Mediated through Jones, therefore, reincarnation provided a web of meanings that connected believers across their individual spiritual interpretations. People were invited to draw connections to several religious systems, or none if they chose.

Some Peoples Temple survivors have said they think the belief in reincarnation was fostered, in part, to appeal to certain clusters of potential believers, like the followers of Father Divine. Reincarnation could attract people interested in metaphysical spirituality, Asian religions, and the youth counterculture of the era. Several families from Willits, a small town near Redwood Valley, participated in an Edgar Cayce study group before joining Peoples Temple. One of the women from that group, Hargrave, feels reincarnation was endorsed specifically because Jones knew people believed in it.⁶² "Jones would find your interest and work on it until he was fully engulfed in it. . . . Anything he could find to enlarge himself or the group, he did, and [he'd] exaggerate it, every single time."⁶³ As noted above, however, Jones seemed to have held a belief in reincarnation from an early age.

Reincarnation was not necessarily an asset in terms of beliefs, and was not always an effective means of recruiting. If Jones' theology appealed to people from some faith backgrounds, it alienated others. For Ross Case, reincarnation represented a theological departure from Christianity, and it was a factor in his decision to leave the Temple.⁶⁴ Jones' claims to divinity also alienated Inez Jauch, a former member of Christ's Church of the Golden Rule, a metaphysical Christian commune in Willits that for a short time allowed Peoples Temple to use its properties. In a letter to Jones she wrote, "You are apparently aware that I reacted to your statement that you are the reincarnation of Jesus as if the [irresistible] force had met the immovable object, since when I was trying to resolve the message came through to me as clearly as if you were talking to me, 'that's it. That's it. Don't waste your time going any farther.'"⁶⁵

Given that not all members and recruits were receptive, it is important to note Jones' intentionality in both introducing reincarnation as a doctrine and establishing it as Christian. Around the same time that Jones directed Lambrev to present karma and reincarnation as biblical

teachings in *The Living Word*, Jones wrote the first draft of a pamphlet entitled *The Letter Killeth, but the Spirit Giveth Life*. One of the few documents Jones penned himself, *The Letter Killeth* enumerated the shortcomings of Christianity as well as its potentially redeeming points. The booklet carried two pages of biblical quotations that Jones felt justified reincarnation—here called “rebirth,” and the doctrine of “God in a Body.”⁶⁶

Jim Jones’ chosen reincarnations reflect a fusion of Christian, non-Christian, and secular hagiography—the streams of thought that fed into Jones’ own understanding of the superhuman. He encouraged followers to see him as the reincarnation of Jesus, Moses, Lenin, and the Buddha. Some members feel Jones selected these religious personas to appeal to many types of people. Hargrave sees Jones’ self-identification with Lenin as a pitch to Socialists and Marxists.⁶⁷ Religious studies scholar David Chidester sees Jones’ fascination with these figures as sincere, however, writing that, “Jesus, Moses, and Lenin were the symbolic paradigms for the revolutionary salvation Jones offered.”⁶⁸ Jesus challenged the authority of the “Sky God” Jones detested; Moses symbolized leading people out of oppression; and Lenin changed the world through revolution. All these personas, however, were meant to support Jones’ own divine incarnation. That is, the paradigms were ultimately secondary to Jones’ own apotheosis. Lambrev sees this desire as one that structured Jones’ combinative use of religious doctrines:

[Jones had] proclaimed himself the reincarnation of Jesus the Christ to his followers in the Midwest before bringing them out to the first of several promised lands. . . . His vocabulary certainly changed, reflecting the transition from an overwhelmingly white to an overwhelmingly black church. . . . But the theology/philosophy from and in terms of which he evolved was never traditionally Christian. It was Indic—as in Hindu, Jain and Buddhist—in a theosophical mode. . . . Jesus to him was merely Ishvara, one of many manifestation of the godhead in a human.⁶⁹

If Jones’ explanation of incarnationism made his deification possible, his theology of reincarnation gave him the flexibility to handle challenges to his authority. In church meetings, he could seem to be generous in allowing people to voice their opinions, though he retained control of the discussion. The recording of a 1974 service in the Los Angeles Temple confirms several important reincarnation beliefs, but is equally revealing of how religious belief was negotiated in Peoples Temple.

Man: Um, Father. Father, you said that we have lived before. . . .

Jones: . . . Now, go ahead. You wish to—. Make these questions, don’t uh, please, anyone, get up and make a testimony. . . .

Man: We have lived in the flesh, but not the flesh we have now.

Jones: No, no, we lived in another body. . . . That's my particular persuasion, due to the revelations that we've had here of the supra- or paranormal. We've seen things that've proven to us that people have lived before. Reverend [Archie] Ijames was one of the early prophets. . . . But we don't require that you believe that. It's biblical. . . . But again, in reference to fellowship in this assembly, it is not required to believe in the doctrine of rebirth or reincarnation.⁷⁰

Jim Jones told Steven Katsaris, the father of Maria Katsaris (1953–1978), a member of Jones' inner circle, that the majority of members individually believed in reincarnation, which in that conversation he tied to metaphysical spirituality:

I've had some things happen here that clearly proved the continuum of *life*. . . . I would say the majority of us probably hold to a doctrine of reincarnation. And this has come about from some of our delving into the parapsychological, although not all.⁷¹

Yet some survivors dismiss the importance of reincarnation. Temple survivor Laura Kohl remembers that, "In the late 1960s and early 1970s, when [Jones] worked to attract some local Edgar Cayce believers, he spoke about reincarnation quite a lot. Later, he seemed to discard it, although he may have actually believed it but realized that most in the congregation found it unacceptable."⁷² She adds that as time went on, Jones avoided the topic of reincarnation.

The way that religious beliefs were handled in Peoples Temple depended very much on context. Jim Jones had a propensity to say many things, and he sometimes rejected reincarnation as an otherworldly belief that, like the "Sky God," held no power. "We had a man last night, he's a very ignorant man, though he was a lawyer, worshipping some guru. [He] said, well, if the people are starving, they're meant to be, because of their karma, their reincarnation. That's what religion does to people."⁷³ In this instance, Jones did not want a belief in karma used to justify social inequities and suffering, which would have contradicted the Marxist and Social Gospel aims for revolutionary service by Peoples Temple members.

Nevertheless, Jones felt it was essential to legitimate himself via reincarnation theology. He encouraged Peoples Temple members to write testimonies about his divine identity (or identities). The Summer 1973 edition of *The Living Word* carried two such endorsements, from Archie Ijames (1913–2004) and Sue Noxon (1945–1978), respectively, entitled "Faith that Moves Mountains" and "Christ Jesus Through Jim Meets Every Need."⁷⁴ Flyers for healing services announced that, "Christ is made real through the most precise and the miraculous healings in this ministry of His servant, Jim Jones!"⁷⁵ An advertisement in the *Chicago*

Defender quoted S. D. Peter, a pastor in the Unity Mission Church, who declared:

I have known Pastor Jim Jones for twenty years, and have found in him the same principled character as that of the man Jesus. . . . [In] Jim Jones I found the highest manifestation of God on Earth. . . . I believe Jim Jones is the Essence of Love. He works day and night serving others and I have never seen him do a selfish act. He is truly the Word Made Flesh and, thank God, I have found him.⁷⁶

When pressed on the question, Jones denied he was Christ, and made statements rejecting reincarnation, but he often claimed to have metaphysical powers.⁷⁷ In interviews he also said he could not understand their origin and confessed to being surprised at their reality. Jones sought to make this seem true, with dramatic healing performances and demonstrations of his telepathic abilities. A sermon from 1972 shows how Jones interwove direct and implied messages, here invoking Exodus 3:14 and breaking into glossolalia while talking about his spirituality: “Sometimes I’ll speak in parables, and when I speak in parables inside, I’ll be choked up and my chest’ll feel tight, but when I say [in full throat] I am the I AM. When I say I am God, when I say I am God, when I say I am God! [glossolalia].”⁷⁸

At least once, reincarnation was validated through a performance of ritual deception. At a service in Redwood Valley in the early 1970s, a voice began to call out, which Jones determined was the disembodied spirit of one of Lenin’s betrayers. Jones claimed the spirit was speaking in Russian, and was asking for forgiveness. He declared that the spirit was forgiven, and therefore freed to be integrated into a human body. After Jones forgave it, the spirit was cast into the body of Patricia Cartmell (1929–1978). Members construed this as an important sign of Jones’ connection to Lenin.⁷⁹

Even Peoples Temple’s music promoted Jones’ reincarnations as divine avatars. One hymn, sometimes called “Sing, Little Children, Sing,” celebrated all of his past lives:

Sing about the ever-present God in the body. . . .
Sing about Spirit of the consciousness
The presence of God
It’s covering the earth
You can sing about God
For he is present
Not afar off
But God in hand. . . .
Praise your God for Jesus has come
Buddha has come
Father has come
Socialism’s come
And they all are one. . . .⁸⁰

Reincarnation was made to matter to the whole community. Jim Jones, sometimes assisted by others, told members who they had been in previous lives. Among the first such named was Joe Phillips (1927–2000), a white congregant from Indiana who helped develop Jones' understanding of karma and reincarnation in its Asian religious form: "In order to explain their special bond, Jim 'revealed' that Joe had lived one life as Ananda, the first among equals of his disciples when he, Jim Jones, became known as the Buddha."⁸¹ Past lives usually confirmed present social roles in the Temple community. James may have received multiple identities, for Hargrave today recalls his being compared to both Saint Peter and John the Baptist.⁸² People often received historic personas—one woman was recognized as Harriet Tubman.⁸³

Many members were thought to have been participants in the 1917 Russian Revolution.⁸⁴ Carolyn Moore Layton (1945–1978, known as Carolyn Layton), for example, was identified as the mistress of Vladimir Lenin.⁸⁵ The biological son of Jim and Marceline Jones, Stephan Jones, told religious studies scholar Mary McCormick Maaga about an incident in fall 1978. When tensions at Jonestown were running high, he witnessed an argument between his father and Carolyn Layton, in which Jim Jones was screaming at her in a Russian accent.⁸⁶ Like the healing services, the past-life discourse created a forum for religious transformation. For most people, the possibility they were reincarnated revolutionaries may have only been an appealing idea, like a fantasy sports team in a betting pool. But for some, the identities were alchemical, capable of transforming life in the Temple into an eternal sacred reality.

By the early 1970s Jim Jones was promising believers that their potential for reincarnation was something they shared with God. In an undated sermon, Jones proclaimed, "Once you have *seen* the *embodiment* of the *oneness* of God, once you know that Jesus is *God* and that he is reincarnatable. He said *these* things shall you do and *greater* [John 14:12]. That means what he was, you can be and greater!"⁸⁷ E. Black points out that for some believers, Jones' reincarnation ideas were part of a full blown "heterodox metaphysical theology" that included not only recognition of Jones as divine but a vibration-based theory of their own spiritual development.⁸⁸ "I've got to raise your vibrations to be sensitive and loving and kind and sacrificial as I am, as socialistic as I am, and then when I get your vibrations up, you will leave the earthbound state," he preached in a 1973 sermon. "That means you'll have a body after a body after a body."⁸⁹

The notion of reincarnation had a variety of functions in Peoples Temple. Tied to metaphysical and Asian spiritualities, reincarnation offered meaning for this-worldly suffering and retribution for wrongs suffered as trespassers are punished. Jones discussed reincarnation as a type of cosmic justice in sermons, like one preserved from 1972 in which he declared:

[I]f it wasn't for reincarnation . . . the Scripture could never say, God was no respecter of persons because we know in one lifetime, some people don't get a fair shake. . . . But if you've lived five, ten, or fifteen lives, maybe you've been a king yesterday and now you're a common servant because you did not learn. [Voice lowers] You did not carry the laws of power and responsibility well. Then you can see at least some shaping up of equality. [Voice rises] Without it, you might as well check God off.⁹⁰

Belief in reincarnation therefore relativized racial differences, since a person born into one ethnicity would be born into another in a future lifetime.

Jones did not care deeply about doctrinal accuracy in his discussions of Hinduism and Buddhism; rather, he spoke in the vernacular of popular western understandings of these traditions. To the extent that reincarnation was tied to a cycle of suffering, selfless action and a commitment to utopian socialism was the way to transcend it. Jones taught:

[I]t's the goal to be selfless. Jesus said deny yourself. Buddha said Nirvana, complete self death to where you identify with the cosmos, you become identified with others. You infuse with other people's lives. But Jesus taught the same thing, *Buddha* taught the same thing, Krishna taught the same thing. All the great world religions taught the same, and even the political scientists of the highest order have taught the same thing. *Lose* your life in service to others.⁹¹

Jones conflated incarnation, reincarnation, and theodicy in another 1972 sermon: "I'm telling you this evening, that if you don't free yourself of mortality, you'll be back here again and again and again [voice rises], and you'll have to toil with this body again, and it'll be crucified before you again."⁹² Jones offered scriptural justification for the "truth of re-birth," and argued for its compatibility with Christian teachings.

This belief [in reincarnation] can cause all Christians to have a greater awareness of their responsibility to their fellow man because it brings home the impact of the concept of, "what we sow we shall also reap" more clearly than any other doctrine. . . . This teaching does not preclude an acceptance of Christ. In fact all who adhere to it in our fellowship endeavor to keep the teachings and commandments of Jesus Christ more closely than any religious group that we have ever known!⁹³

Reincarnation was sometimes used as a threat, something visited on people who had failed the revolution. Jim Jones warned, "You will continue to reincarnate until you overcome and become socialistic."⁹⁴ Reincarnation also was held forward as punishment, often for failing the revolution. Ironically, suicide was singled out as an act with a heavy karmic burden: "Any suicide for selfish reasons . . . is *always* going to

bring you immorality, and your history will be *cursed*. . . You'll come back again reincarnated in a *lower* form. . . . [S]uicide is unacceptable. Except for revolutionary reasons."⁹⁵ Jim Jones warned that unlike selfless "revolutionary suicide," persons motivated by selfish reasons to commit suicide would reincarnated five hundred lifetimes or more, and they might be reborn in lower forms of life.⁹⁶

Finally, belief in reincarnation may have been inculcated to make revolutionary suicide more palatable. For some, it seems to have played a role in the justifying logic for the actions on the final day. On the famous tape made on 18 November 1978, Jim Jones and Jim McElvane (1932–1978) each describe dying as "stepping over into another plane."⁹⁷ Mary McCormick Maaga felt this reflected an effort to calm and comfort people, by assuring them that their life together would continue.⁹⁸ At the same time, reincarnation has been a source of comfort for some Jonestown survivors. Some are still processing their feelings about Jones' incarnation, and for a few this means continuing to believe Jones was who and what he said he was.⁹⁹ A few survivors draw reincarnation into their understandings of the decline and tragic end of the community, seeing the deaths as a form of karmic debt for wrongs Temple members had committed in past lives. In this view, the deaths in Jonestown were both voluntarily chosen and a just punishment.¹⁰⁰

Perhaps most surprising, a small number of survivors have found healing through past-life regression.¹⁰¹ For several individuals, regression therapy is a continuation of spiritual interests that preceded involvement in Peoples Temple. In one case, however, a previously agnostic member developed an interest in reincarnation much later in life, after being introduced to New Thought spirituality.¹⁰²

CONCLUSION: DIVINE MATERIALITY AND NEW CHRISTIANITIES

The lived response to incarnation and reincarnation beliefs in Peoples Temple should alert us to the complexity these themes carry when expressed in actual experience—fraught with doubts, disagreements, and myriad human needs. Recognizing the experiential pluralism that existed in Peoples Temple helps explain how a religion can grow while espousing what appear from the outside to be bizarre truth claims. People are not necessarily gullible; rather, they accept religious messages in highly personalized ways.

New religions often seek to reorder ritual and everyday life by creating new social systems. Messianic incarnation is a common occurrence within religions that use the existing set of symbols and ideas to construct something new and yet familiar. It is also possible that reincarnation is growing in popularity within new Christianities due to a decline in belief

in traditional western views of the afterlife. If this is so, the popularity of reincarnation is partly a reflection of how conventional Christian traditions are under pressure from increased public awareness of various other religions.

As a case study, Peoples Temple should lead us to investigate experiential pluralism in other instances, including where divine materiality is emphasized. The complicated sentiments of Temple members on Jim Jones' deification, reincarnation, and religion in general underscore something important about lived religion. Adherents to "strong" beliefs should not be portrayed monochromatically or simplistically. The potential exists for there to be a mixed reception within a movement to innovative doctrines, and complicated human responses to a messianic leader's authority.

We need to take seriously the human inclination to recognize living individuals as immediate proxies for an otherwise distant spirit, however unsettling this approach may be to the modernist outlook. Pioneering sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) forecast the contemporary predicament more than one hundred years ago, arguing that technological advancement had come at the cost of spirituality and a sense of wonder. The tendency to deify points to the human need for enchantment, here expressed through devotion.¹⁰³ Simultaneously, belief in reincarnation offers new freedom in constructing religious meaning, through alternative narratives to the Christian afterlife. The contemporary rise of both incarnation and reincarnation beliefs reflect the theological stresses of our time, and the enduring will to believe.

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- ⁸⁰ Q956 Transcript, prepared by Fielding McGehee III, The Jonestown Institute, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=27627, last modified 18 June 2018.
- ⁸¹ Garrett Lambrev, "Joe Phillips: A Reflection," *the jonestown report* 15 (November 2013), http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=40205.
- ⁸² Hargrave interview.
- ⁸³ Lambrev interview.
- ⁸⁴ Laurie Efrein, telephone interview, 1 October 2017.
- ⁸⁵ Rebecca Moore, *The Jonestown Letters: Correspondence of the Moore Family, 1970–1985* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press 1986), 62.
- ⁸⁶ Moore, *The Jonestown Letters*, 16; Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown*, 106–07.
- ⁸⁷ Q1055-1 Transcript, prepared by Freya Kory, The Jonestown Institute, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=27321, last modified 18 February 2016. Italics in original.
- ⁸⁸ E. Black, "Atheistic Gods and Divine Leaders."
- ⁸⁹ Q962 Transcript.
- ⁹⁰ Q353 Transcript.
- ⁹¹ Q1023 Transcript, prepared by Serriina Covarrubias, The Jonestown Institute, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=27309, last modified 18 February 2016. Italics in original.
- ⁹² Q353 Transcript.
- ⁹³ Jim Jones, "Special Sermon and Message by Pastor Jones."
- ⁹⁴ Q962 Transcript.
- ⁹⁵ Q637 Transcript, prepared by Fielding M. McGehee III, The Jonestown Institute, http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=27509, last modified 20 August 2014. Italics in original.
- ⁹⁶ Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide*, 147–48.
- ⁹⁷ Q042 Transcript, prepared by Fielding M. McGehee III, The Jonestown Institute, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=29079, accessed 16 July 2018.
- ⁹⁸ Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown*, 9.
- ⁹⁹ Hargrave interview; Lambrev interview; Efrein interview; Anonymous interview.
- ¹⁰⁰ Efrein interview.
- ¹⁰¹ Lambrev interview; Efrein interview.
- ¹⁰² Anonymous interview.
- ¹⁰³ Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 155.