

# Jonestown and Bishop Hill: Continuities and Disjunctures in Religious Conflict

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IN NORTHERN ILLINOIS, the traveler who takes the byway to the quiet hamlet of Bishop Hill will find it difficult to imagine the streets as they were one spring day in 1850, filled with an angry mob that terrorized innocent citizens and threatened to burn the entire town to ashes. There is justifiably great pride in the accomplishments of the Swedish immigrant communal religious colony that once was Bishop Hill, so it is especially difficult to understand that community as the object of collective rampage. Yet Bishop Hill was born of religious conflict in the old country, and in the New World, its leader, Eric Janson, died of an assassin's bullet born of conflict between the community and the outside.

In 1977 a migration of a quite different Utopian religious social movement left its "Babylon" (as Janson called his native Sweden) for the shores of another land. Like Janson's group, their hopes were of following their way of life free from the controversies that stormed around them in the old country. Led by Jim Jones, some 1,000 members of Peoples Temple left California for what Jones called their Promised Land—the colony of Jonestown, in the socialist republic of Guyana on the north-east coast of South America. A little over a year after the migration came the murders and mass suicide at Jonestown. Even today the stigma hangs over those events so strongly that it is difficult for us to gain perspective on what happened.

In what follows, I seek to pinpoint the continuities and the different outcomes of religious conflict in Bishop Hill and Jonestown.<sup>1</sup> To compare

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Jones's Peoples Temple with Eric Janson's Bishop Hill may seem like a long reach, and even unfair: over a century apart in time, one a heretical Lutheran sect of immigrant Swedes from a part of the world where industrialization had hardly begun, the other, blacks and whites fleeing a heartland of industrialization; one group Christian communitarian capitalists, the other, religiously anti-capitalist political communists, ending its existence in the terrible collective act of mass suicide. Yet it is my contention that these differences were not fundamental ones, but details of setting and differences in outcome that nevertheless bespeak a single general plot: the flight of an apocalyptic sect to establish a promised land. Certainly there are other nineteenth century groups, like the Mormons, whose history might seem to yield sharper parallels to Jonestown. But precisely because Bishop Hill and Jonestown seem so different on the surface, yet share a common dynamic, their comparison can help alert us to the general character of religious conflict between apocalyptic communal social movements and their detractors in society at large.

#### *Continuities in Religious Conflict*

Both Eric Janson and Jim Jones founded religious communities in ways that fit the general model of what I have termed the "apocalyptic sect."<sup>2</sup> Such groups, typically founded by charismatic leaders, establish

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recent comprehensive study of source materials by Paul Elmen, *Wheat Flour Messiah: Eric Jansson of Bishop Hill*. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976). For Peoples Temple, the essay is based on data analyzed in my comprehensive study, John R. Hall, *Gone From the Promised Land: Jonestown in American Cultural History*. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1987), which contains extensive source citations that are not duplicated here. The Peoples Temple research project was based on five major types of data: (1) original documents of Peoples Temple, its members, and other groups (e.g., the Concerned Relatives; the U.S. Department of State) and individuals, including personal journals, correspondence, reports, financial records, public relations materials, and miscellaneous other materials; (2) original tape recordings of Temple meetings, telephone conversations, interviews, sermons, staff meetings, and other events recorded by Temple staff; (3) personal interviews I undertook in Georgetown, Guyana; San Francisco; Washington, D.C.; and elsewhere after November 1978, with certain surviving members of Peoples Temple, certain members of the Concerned Relatives, and various other informed sources such as government officials in the United States and Guyana, and church officials; (4) new accounts, both prior to and after November 1978; and (5) various books and other secondary source materials published after November 1978. I have established an archive containing all unpublished materials used in the research project at the Library of the California Historical Society, San Francisco, California.

2. John R. Hall, *The Ways Out: Utopian Communal Groups in an Age of Babylon*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978). Among communal groups, it is particularly the "other-worldly" apocalyptic sects that are capable of marshalling high degrees of commitment from their members; see John R. Hall, "Social Organization and Pathways of Commitment: Ideal Types, Rational Choice Theory, and the Kanter Thesis." *American Sociological Review* (forthcoming, 1988).

a radical separation between themselves and the established social world, which they regard as hopelessly evil. Logically, there are two directions of development that such a group might take. One approach is to flee "this" world to found a "city on a hill" that offers a tableau of heaven brought down to earth. The other, more revolutionary, approach is to take on a holy war to try to vanquish the infidels from dominion over the world where they exercise their evil ways. In practice, these ideal-typical distinctions sometimes are conflated, especially when believers who want to flee "this" world find themselves embroiled in conflict with their detractors. Such was the case with followers of both Eric Janson and Jim Jones.

Both Jones and Janson were men who came upon their callings outside the formal frameworks of institutionalized religion—Janson in the *Id'sare* (layreader) conventicles in Lutheran Sweden, Jones in street preaching and the Pentecostal revival circuit. Each felt the inner gifts of spirit that discount the learned positions of mere scholastics, and each held out to his followers the promise of a salvation that was more difficult to come by in the established corridors of religion. Janson and Jones each came very close to claiming that he was the Second Coming. Converts, many of them disillusioned with the institutionalized churches of their day, flocked into the arms of these two men, but in neither case were they most often from among the higher ranks of society; instead, though each attracted some highly competent and effective associates, they found their successes largely among the common folk and to some extent, the dispossessed. And though they couched it in slightly different terms (of anti-intellectual perfectionism for Janson and the inner light of "god socialism" for Jones), the two men held out to their followers the possibility that they too could be filled with the power of inward grace. Both men claimed the power to heal, and each one told his followers that whoever fell sick somehow was displaying a lack of faithfulness to the cause. Those who left the fold, they warned their flock, would lose the protection of the group's dispensation, and evil would befall them. Those who stayed would prosper in grace, and in the mission to which they were called, which in both cases required abandoning their countries of birth and setting off for a colony organized along Pentecostal communalist lines in a new land.

Understandably, when these men proclaimed their prophetic missions in their native countries, not every citizen or religious functionary saw things their way. By any conventional definition, they were heretics: Janson in Sweden for holding "illegal" meetings of lay preaching and for burning the books of Martin Luther, Jones for slamming the Bible on the floor and ranting on about the "lies" in this "black book." But they were more than heretics: they were religious revolutionaries in the style of

Thomas Munzer, men who wanted to turn the tables on the social and religious establishments of their day. Understandably, Janson and Jones often met pitched resistance, and on more than one occasion they both seem to have cultivated it. Each was adept at the psychodrama of religious conflict. Each took persecution precisely as a sign that his cause was just, and each pointed to the acts of opponents as proof that his persecutors were so filled with evil as to be unable to confront the clear light of truth.

For their detractors, matters came to be just as clearcut, but from different points of view. Some who heard Jones and Janson in their native lands simply believed they were wrong, perhaps deluded. But others came to see them as significant threats to the social order, and they puzzled over whether these two men were mentally deranged megalomaniacs who had happened upon religion as a convenient foil for madness. In the case of Jones, in hindsight, the mass suicide would offer ready evidence used to lend support to this view. More cynical critics saw the economic side of things. Despite the lack of evidence that either Janson or Jones was a charlatan out for personal gain, this was precisely the charge of opponents who suspected that each man was out to rob gullible believers by offering them "pie in the sky."<sup>3</sup>

The central charge of opponents in both cases, however, centered not on money or insanity, but on religious heresy that captured vulnerable seekers in its snare. Both Eric Janson and Jim Jones lived amidst swirls of charges concerning sexual impropriety (much closer to the mark in Jones's case, but still attaining the status of legend). Both men were charged with using, in the words of a Swedish archbishop, "demonic" psychic powers on followers who were "bewitched" by the "gift of speech."<sup>4</sup> For the outsiders who rose up in opposition to Jones and to Janson, more was at stake than just theological ideas; they took up a battle for their congregations, members of their families, for their country.

In neither case did the prophet's opponents find themselves strong enough on their own to counter the heretical religious social movement, but in each case the need to do so rose to the fever pitch of a zeal as compelling as the zeal of the heretics themselves. Both Janson and Jones found themselves ready targets of a press that often seemed to see events through the eyes of their detractors alone, and both men found opponents using the legitimated power of state authority to criminalize their actions. In each situation, the beleaguered prophet tried political ploys of his own to avoid arrest and conviction, and, failing to solve problems despite the proclaimed power of his cause, each undertook a collective

3. On Janson, see, e.g., Elmen, *Wheat Flour Messiah*, p. 84; for Jones, see Hall, *Gone From the Promised Land*, esp. pp. 32-35.

4. Samuel Kamp, quoted in Elmen, *Wheat Flour Messiah*, p. 88.

religious migration to found a communal colony in a foreign land. This course of action might solve several problems at once; it could be expected to solidify a committed cadre of followers, allow escape from the travails of conflicts with opponents, and attain the sanctuary of a heaven-on-earth.

Yet the dream of a heaven-on-earth and the reality of pioneering came to very different things in both groups. Janson followed the movement of other Swedes to Illinois. In the Jansonists' 1840s migration from Sweden, some 350 men, women and children died in trans-Atlantic voyages or in the United States. Cholera that rampaged through the Bishop Hill colony in the early years took the lives of two hundred more.<sup>5</sup> Despite the difficulties, Bishop Hill prospered as an economy organized according to Pentecostal ideas of collective property, centered on farming, weaving, and petty production for trade. Medical care was more advanced at Jonestown, but the soil was much less fertile, and during its brief history, Jonestown did not get established economically the way Bishop Hill had, though its efforts were directed along similar lines of farming and craft production.<sup>6</sup>

At both Bishop Hill and Jonestown, a strong regimen of heavy toil accompanied by the seemingly endless exhortations of a fearless leader left many immigrants disabused of whatever motives had brought them there.<sup>7</sup> Outside, relatives suspected the worst. In each case, family members left behind in the migration charged that the contents of letters back to them had been fabricated, so that they could not tell the true conditions under which their relatives lived. There were defections both at Bishop Hill and at Jonestown, and in each case there were some outside family members who were willing to go to great lengths to rescue their loved ones from a path they deemed lost, even though, again in each case, the loved ones who were the objects of rescue attempts did not always appreciate the efforts on their behalf. The latter individuals had acted of their own free will, they typically would maintain, and not, as their relatives believed, under the hypnotic influence of a charlatan. At both Bishop Hill and at Jonestown, this kind of conflict over the allegiance of followers was the axis on which communal history turned. In both cases, such conflict set in motion events leading to the deaths of the leaders, and in the case of Jonestown, 917 other people also perished. The parallels

5. Adolph B. Benson and Naboth Hedin, *Americans From Sweden*. (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1950), pp. 99,110-11; V.E Calverton, *Where Angels Dared to Tread*. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1941), p. 120.

6. Elmen, *Wheat Flour Messiah*, pp. 124-29; Hall, *Gone From the Promised Land*, esp. pp. 235-37.

7. George M. Stephenson, *The Religious Aspects of Swedish Immigration*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1932), pp. 56-66; Hall, *Gone From the Promised Land*, ch. 9.

of tragic religious conflict can be understood most easily by considering the events of each case.

*The Assassination of Eric Janson*

At Bishop Hill the conflict between Janson's followers and antagonists among the citizens of Illinois came to a head nearly six years after the Mormon leader Joseph Smith had been attacked and murdered at the Carthage jail near his Illinois colony settlement of Nauvoo. Frontier Illinois was known to be able to raise mobs to action, and if they could claim to take justice into their own hands, so much the better.<sup>8</sup> At Bishop Hill, the volatile issue of family ties versus allegiance to religion was an enduring problem<sup>9</sup>, and one incident became an occasion for a mob.

The protagonist, John Root, was a man of Swedish descent, though he was not one of the Bishop Hill immigrants. Root seems to have been a bit of the gallant: of upper-class bearing, but an adventuring riverboat traveler who claimed glories as a military man, he made his way up the Mississippi River and happened into the colony of Bishop Hill in 1848, where he set about courting Charlotta Lovisa, a twenty-six-year-old cousin of Eric Janson. Root and "Lotta" were married in November of 1849 with a marriage contract that, according to Lotta, included the statement, "If it should happen that John Root should lose his faith and wish to leave the colony, I as his wife have complete right to stay with my friends and relatives as long as I wish, without any interference from him."<sup>10</sup>

John Root never seems to have been too taken with the religious and communitarian life of Bishop Hill. He really didn't belong in the colony, and he disappeared for months at a time, hunting with rifle and bowie knife, and, rumors had it, perhaps murdering a Jewish peddler whose company he had taken up.<sup>11</sup> Soon enough Root concluded that he and his wife and a recently born son should leave Bishop Hill, perhaps in part to escape the cholera epidemic raging there. He knew Lotta did not want to leave, but he was shocked when she refused to depart with him. Root was an overbearing man, perhaps even given to abusive violence, and it is possible that Lotta feared for her personal safety alone with him. Moreover, Lotta spoke only Swedish, and by leaving, would have isolated herself from relatives, friends and an ethnic enclave. As if the young woman could not have valid reasons of her own to want to avoid departure, outsiders speculated that she was held captive under the sway

8. Elmen, *Wheat Flour Messiah*, p. 155.

9. Stephenson, *The Religious Aspects of Swedish Immigration*, pp. 64-66.

10. Quoted in Elmen, *Wheat Flour Messiah*, p. 151.

11. Mikkelsen, "The Bishop Hill Colony," pp. 38-9.

of Eric Janson's preaching of damnation for defectors. One letter to an editor actually foreshadowed modern deprogramming ideas, asserting the line of reasoning that Root might have followed: "He thought that if she could be removed from under his [Janson's] influence for a time, to a clearer atmosphere, where her mind could regain its natural balance, she would be perfectly satisfied and happy to live with him."<sup>12</sup>

Lotta Root's decision enraged her husband, and on March 2, 1850 he engaged an accomplice to help him take the woman and their child away from Bishop Hill by force. The plot was foiled in a showdown on the way out of town, but then John Root contrived to have his wife show up in court in the town of Cambridge, and from there he abducted her to the house of Lotta's sister in Chicago. Here Root was foiled again, for the two sisters colluded with men from Bishop Hill and arranged an escape back to the colony.

Unable to obtain the custody of his own wife and son, John Root was now beside himself with talk of revenge and suicide, and on March 26th in the town of Cambridge, Illinois, he managed to raise a frontier mob sympathetic to his cause. Root marched them over to Bishop Hill to demand that the colony residents bring forth his wife and son, and Eric Janson as well. When the objects of their search were not to be found, the fired-up crowd lay siege to Bishop Hill for three days.

Janson had faced this sort of conflict with outsiders before, in Sweden, and he believed that sometimes it was better to disappear than to make a counterproductive stand. He fled to St. Louis with Lotta Root, her son, and a handful of supporters. While there, Lotta Root swore out an affidavit asserting that she had left her husband "voluntarily" and "on account of ill treatment and abuse," not because of any influence of her family and friends at Bishop Hill.<sup>13</sup> The group only returned to Bishop Hill when the danger from mob action had well subsided.

Less than a month after his return from exile, Eric Janson was called to court in Cambridge, as the colony's defendant in several lawsuits. He seems to have believed that this was the end, telling worshipers on Sunday, May 12, 1850 that his next communion would be "new in my father's kingdom."<sup>14</sup> Monday was court day, and when a follower named Richard Mascall pulled up to the Janson house with a buggy to take Bishop Hill's leader to Cambridge, Janson came down the steps asking, "Well, Mr. Mascall, will you stop the bullet for me today?" In the courtroom, Janson remained during a recess, looking out the window.

12. Anonymous writer to *Gem of the Prairie*, 5/25/1850, quoted in Elmen, *Wheat Flour Messiah*, p. 153.

13. Quoted in Elmen, *Wheat Flour Messiah*, p. 159.

14. Quoted in Mikkelsen, "The Bishop Hill Colony," p. 42.

He heard his name called out and turned to find John Root. After some heated words in Swedish, Root fired off two shots from a pistol, one of them to Eric Janson's heart. The man who many times had outwitted his assailants had chosen not to avoid this one. He was dead in five minutes.

John Root was convicted of manslaughter rather than murder, on the grounds that his was a crime of passion. Illinois' governor pardoned Root before he served his full two-year term, but Root died a few years later, seemingly overwhelmed and spent by his life's fateful turn. Lotta Root had divorced her husband while he was in prison, and she lived out her life to the age of eighty on a farm two miles from Bishop Hill.<sup>15</sup>

With the assassination of Janson, Bishop Hill had undergone a charismatic crisis of succession. Once it was settled in favor of Jonas Olson, a religious leader who opposed hereditary succession, the community prospered for a number of years. Indeed, financial prosperity required the drafting of a charter for the collective holding of property, and it was a financial crisis in 1857, stemming from speculative actions of a charter trustee, that led to demands for individualization of property. By 1862 Bishop Hill no longer could be called a communal society, but its transformation had other causes than the assassination of its founder.<sup>16</sup>

#### *The Mass Suicide of Jim Jones and His Followers*

The end of the colony at Jonestown always will have greater notoriety than the story of Eric Janson's end, but the events may never be any better understood. It is widely known that Congressman Leo Ryan of California visited the community in Guyana in 1978, that he found some fifteen residents who wished to return to the U.S. with him, and that as the group was preparing to depart the Port Kaituma airstrip on November 18th, they were attacked, and Ryan and four others killed, by sharpshooters from Jonestown.

Back at Jonestown, a tape recorder caught the words as Jim Jones cried out to the assembled residents, "If we can't live in peace, let's die in peace!"<sup>17</sup> One woman offered vigorous dissent, but she was drowned out by others. A man came forward to tell Jones, "We're all ready to go. If you tell us we have to give our lives now, we're ready. All the sisters and brothers are with me." As Jones exhorted them to what he called "revolutionary suicide," nurses dispensed Fla-Vor-Aid laced with cyanide and tranquilizers to over nine hundred men, women and children, about

15. Elmen, *Wheat Flour Messiah*, pp. 161-9.

16. Mikkelsen, "The Bishop Hill Colony," pp. 47-67.

17. Peoples Temple, "Jonestown tape." November 18, 1978, Jonestown pavilion suicide meeting, cassette tape. (New York: Creative Arts Guild, 1979), copy at California Historical Society Library, San Francisco, California.

70% of them black, the others white. Jones himself died of a gun wound to the head, an apparent suicide, and his personal nurse, the daughter of a Methodist minister, took her own life, too, scrawling out in a note, "we died because you would not let us live in peace."

Certainly young children at Jonestown did not knowingly take their own lives, and no doubt there were adults herded into the mass death. Yet it seems evident that most adults had been steeled to accept the possibility of martyrdom, and they accepted Jones's definition of Ryan's visit as the moment of truth. Popular accounts of the event are hard put to explain it, because they cannot accede to the possibility that the members of the community had any possible rationale for their ghastly action.<sup>18</sup> Without such rationale, the event would have to be understood as the machinations of a madman, not mass suicide, but mass murder.

Yet Jones and his most loyal followers believed in what they did. For them it was, as one member claimed, "better even to die than to be constantly harassed from one continent to the next."<sup>19</sup> Whereas Eric Janson's detractors in Sweden had not followed him to the new world, Jones and his followers kept fleeing from opponents, searching out the next promised land, only to find their opponents coming after them.

Jones founded Peoples Temple in Indianapolis, Indiana, in the 1950s, but Indianapolis was not hospitable to desegregation, and Jones and some 70 families migrated to the rural California community of Redwood Valley in 1965, in hopes of finding a more hospitable climate for an interracial, socialistic congregation. There, and eventually in San Francisco and Los Angeles, Peoples Temple prospered, despite its controversial program. Most of the time, Temple staff succeeded at cultivating positive news coverage, and the growing movement attracted the praise of numerous politicians seeking their support. But publicity and government investigations also were the Temple's undoing in the United States. Peoples Temple faced the same problems Eric Janson and other leaders of deviant religious social movements had faced in earlier religious migrations: opponents accused them of a confidence racket, brainwashing, and kidnapping. In the case of Peoples Temple, political, religious and family opponents became aligned through publicity in the mass media. After a negative San Francisco *Examiner* news article in 1972, the Temple took steps to establish an agricultural colony in Guyana. In the summer of 1977, in the midst of concerns about Internal Revenue Service investigations and a second wave of negative publicity generated

18. See, e.g., Jeannie Mills, *Six Years With God: Life Inside Reverend Jim Jones's Peoples Temple*. (N.Y.: A&W, 1979); Tim Reiterman and John Jacobs, *Raven: The Untold Story of The Reverend Jim Jones and His People*. (N.Y.: Dutton 1982); James Reston, Jr., *Our Father Who Art in Hell*. (New York: Times Books, 1981).

19. Quoted in Hall, *Gone From the Promised Land*, p. 232.

by the opponents, Jones and a group of some 1,000 followers left for Guyana en masse. After the migration, the opponents formed a counter-movement group, the Concerned Relatives, and mounted an intensive legal and public relations campaign against Jones, hoping, as Peoples Temple staff learned, that Jim Jones would "overreact" to their efforts and give the opponents cause to demand direct exercise of authority by the government of Guyana over the effectively autonomous community.<sup>20</sup> The opponents' cause rested on the charge that people at Jonestown were being kept from their own loved ones. Though specific applications of this charge typically ignored questions of legal custody and the right of adults to privacy (even from their own relatives), nevertheless the relatives managed to attract a powerful sympathy for their plight among certain segments of the public in the United States.

The most celebrated case, indeed, the symbolic centerpiece of the conflict, was a child whom Jim Jones claimed as a biological son, John Victor Stoen, born to Grace Stoen. The child's legal parents, Grace Stoen and Timothy Stoen, had left him behind with Peoples Temple: first Grace separated from her husband and defected from the Temple with a boyfriend; later, Tim Stoen defected from a Temple house in Georgetown, Guyana, while the boy remained in Jonestown. In Peoples Temple's possession were signed documents placing legal custody in the hands of Temple members. John Victor had been raised communally, and leaving him behind may have made sense within the communal calculus of Peoples Temple, but from the outside it appeared that the legal parents had abandoned their son to a cult. After Tim Stoen and Grace Stoen both were on the outside, they aligned themselves with other opponents and began a relentless struggle to salvage their own honor from the stigma of earlier actions.

Once the Temple's opponents put forward the argument that Jones brainwashed people and held them against their will, they created in their own minds a license to rescue their loved ones, whether those loved ones wanted to be rescued or not. Eventually the frustrations of legal battles and resistance to their efforts from their own relatives at Jonestown led the opponents to conclude that they could only win individual battles by winning the larger war. Their goal, as one opponent was heard to say, became nothing less than to "dismantle" Jonestown<sup>21</sup> and it was this goal that led to recruitment of Congressman Leo Ryan to their cause.

Far from an independent congressman engaged in an objective investigation, Ryan was a man whose family had already lost members to other so-called cults; he already had tried to take action against cults

20. Hall, *Gone From the Promised Land*, p. 230.

21. Hall, *Gone From the Promised Land*, p. 233.

in Congress, and he had unambiguously declared his allegiance with the Concerned Relatives. From the Jonestown viewpoint, the expedition of Ryan and the delegation of Concerned Relatives to Jonestown in November of 1978 was one step in the larger plan to "dismantle" the community. For the faithful among the residents of Jonestown, Congressman Ryan amounted to an external authority allied with their enemies. They saw his visit as orchestrated to establish a warrant for shutting down the community in which they had invested their whole lives and fortunes. When Ryan obtained defections that the opponents could ballyhoo, Jones believed that their collective fate had been sealed: Jonestown had played out all its options for survival as an independent community. Jones insisted, "If we can't live in peace, then let's die in peace."<sup>22</sup> He and his loyalist followers believed their enemies would not rest in their efforts until they had succeeded in their goal of ending Jonestown's existence. With a congressman at their side and defectors to offer atrocity tales, history seemed on the side of the opponents. Refusing to accept this slow destruction of their world by outsiders whom they deemed illegitimate, Jones and his followers took their own revenge against their opponents by murdering Ryan and others at an airstrip. Back at Jonestown they then destroyed their loved ones and themselves by drinking a punch laced with cyanide.

### *Discontinuities in Religious Conflict*

The differences between the histories of Bishop Hill and Jonestown are substantial, but they are differences between unfoldings of the same basic plot. In each case, there was a history of struggles between the community and opponents in society-at-large, and in each case the struggles became focused on custody of residents of the community. In each case opponents became enraged and frustrated at their inability to force their wills on their relatives, and the battle over relatives led to violent conflict.

It is clear that Jones and his followers were more willing than the people of Bishop Hill to use violence, and that the opponents of Jim Jones were less prone to violence than John Root and his Illinois frontier mob. However, the distinction is not so clearcut, for Jones's opponents actually threatened violence against the group and some of them broke the law trying to attain their ends. By now it is clear that the mass suicide cannot be understood independently of the actions of its opponents.<sup>23</sup> The

22. Quoted in Hall, *Gone From the Promised Land*, p. 282.

23. John R. Hall, "The Impact of Apostates on the Trajectories of Religious Movements: the Case of People Temple," in David G. Bromley (ed.), *Falling From the Faith: the Causes, Course, and Consequences of Religious Apostasy*. (Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE, forthcoming, 1988).

people of Jonestown clearly were steeled to defend their community by use of force against opponents, but they sought to avoid drawing innocent parties like the Guyanese Defense Forces into their struggle with the Concerned Relatives and Congressman Ryan. In the end, their most horrendous act of violence—the mass suicide—was directed inwardly, at themselves.

For their parts Eric Janson and his followers over a century earlier thrived on the controversy that fueled Janson's success as a prophet, and they plotted their moves as though at war. Nor was this conceived in purely non-violent terms: at one point Janson foretold of life in the U.S., "When the time is ripe... our blood will flow for the sake of the truth in this land of freedom."<sup>24</sup> Janson's statement never was translated into action initiated by his group, but given his assassination, it cannot be dismissed as bad prophecy either. More to the point, the rhetoric of Janson's statement contains the messianic roots of apocalyptic struggle that also can be found in pronouncements by Jim Jones.<sup>25</sup>

In short, both Jonestown and Bishop Hill enjoined religious conflict that had fundamentally equivalent sources in the gulf that comes to exist between apocalyptic religious social movements and society-at-large. In both cases, moreover, actual violence developed out of conflicts over the allegiance of members of the group opposed by their outside relatives, and in both cases, the leaders remained committed to the group's definition of the situation, even to the point of death—Janson assassinated by an outraged and dishonored husband, Jones apparently taking his own life with a pistol at the conclusion of the mass suicide.

The differences between assassination at Bishop Hill and mass carnage at Jonestown stem in part from a heightened sense of martyrdom in the Guyana colony, partly connected to the seige mentality that Jones promoted as part of their struggle for socialism. But the most decisive differences between Bishop Hill and Jonestown derive from (1) the changed social conditions from one historical epoch to the next, and from (2) the relative resources of the opposing sides. In the nineteenth century, Eric Janson had his Swedish concerned relatives too, but the voyage to the new world was long and dangerous, and communication, slow and ineffective. Once Janson and his followers escaped Sweden, opponents there failed to muster the initiative for a countermovement. The Concerned Relatives, on the other hand, could fly to Guyana in a matter of hours. Moreover, even in the face of the Temple's years of coopting press and politicians, the opponents adeptly marshalled governmental and mass media resources to their cause.<sup>26</sup> John Root could raise a mob, but

25. E.g., quoted in Hall, *Gone From the Promised Land*, pp. 205, 218.

26. Hall, *Gone From the Promised Land*, pp. 141-71, 228-32, 246-47.

he could not legitimate it. By contrast, the Concerned Relatives eventually brought the legitimate power of a U.S. congressman, reporters, and a television network news crew to their side, and no matter where Jones and his followers went in this world, their detractors would not be far behind.

The wider consequences of events at Bishop Hill and at Jonestown of course were quite different. Janson's assassination seems to have had little wider effect, even within the community itself. Jonestown's murders and mass suicides, on the other hand, came at the peak of a wave of concern about "cults" in the U.S., and the event undoubtedly changed the climate, both for new religious movements and for their detractors. What has not disappeared is the messianic apocalyptic sect, whether from the right, the left, or the "New Age." To mention only a few cases, during the years since Jonestown: the conflict between Bhagwan Rajneesh and detractors in Oregon; the prosecution of the neo-Nazi group—the Order—in Idaho, and a linked group along the Missouri-Arkansas border—the Covenant, the Sword, and the Arm of the Lord (CSA); and the Mormon family standoff in Utah in 1988. Authorities have become increasingly sophisticated in handling incidents involving such groups, yet the very fact that they have done so suggests that Jonestown was not an isolated incident, but the most extreme case of a wider culture of apocalyptic sects in the U.S. that exist in opposition to the established order, and beyond its effective legitimate authority.