

## Daniel Jeremy Silver Collection Digitization Project

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The Ugly Face of Religion - Jonestown, 1978.

## The Ugly Face of Religion Daniel Jeremy Silver December 3, 1978

Havdalah is the gracious ceremony which separates the Sabbath from the work week. We recite a Kiddush. A spice box is passed around. The candle which has burned throughout the long day is extinguished in the wine. The sabbath is ended. Another work week has begun. The separation has been marked.

The Hebrew word root, Bet-daled-lamed, means to separate or to distinguish. In the Torah we are told v'hiv-dalti etchem mi-kol ha-amim, that Israel was given the covenant in order to distinguish the community from other peoples. By obedience to the commandments we would become a holy people. In common speech when someone suggested that there were differences, in quality or kind, between phenomena of the same order; he used a phrase which featured this verb. The he referred to the living and the dead in the same sentence, a speaker would say after the name of the living person, yibadel-le-hayim, may he be separated out for long life. To distinguish between items of the same kind as to quality or worth he would add the phrase, le-havdil, let there be a clear distinction. So the sentence: Jim Jones and Martin Luther King, le-havdil, were ministers in the Civil Rights Movement, Or the sentence, the Jonestown commune and an Israeli kibbutz, le havdil, are rural utopian communes.

The ability to separate out items, objects or phenomena of the same general species and to make distinctions as to quality or worth among them is the essence of judgment. I have been troubled that the spate of reporting and commentary which has been published about the ghastly and garrish events of Jonestown has tended to treat the event as unique, that is, as a pathological aberration. I would like to suggest that we will not understand what happened until we are prepared to accept the sentence: The Temple, Saint John's Cathedral, The Church of the Covenant and le havdil the People's Temple are religious institutions. The distinction which is to be made is not that these respected congregations are religious institutions, while the People's Temple is a cult,

About ten years ago a campaign to promote religion in American life was sponsored by some civic group, perhaps the Advertising Council. Billboards went up which featured the motto: "It Matters Not Where You Go On Sunday, Just Go." In the background there was a dome, a spire, and a number of other distinguishable ecclesiastical roof lines. In point of fact, it matters a great deal where you go and it is not only a matter of the original choice. The same congregation can be a quite different place from year to year. When the People's Temple first began in Indianapolis it was a community of dedicated people who believed in participatory democracy, integration, and utopian communism, who believed much as Jesus probably believed two thousand years ago.

Over the years it changed from a People's Church to a Leader's Church.

An assistant minister dates the change for us. He reports that in 1961 Reverend Jones took a Bible and threw it on the floor, saying: "They are more interested in this than in me." Those who joined after 1961 joined the church where the leader now sounded the original themes for his own purposes. Congregations go through changes just as people do.

Most Americans assume that religion deals with God. We define a religious person as one who is affiliated with a traditional congregation. Since we also recognize that most affiliation is tepid, and since there are few apparent emotional or character differences between those who are affiliated and those who are not, we tend to think of religious ideas as relatively insignificant. Because few challenge our beliefs we do not have to make much of them.

Need I remind you that religion is not defined by affiliation with a recognized religious institution. Need I remind you that religious movements do not necessarily affirm God. Indeed, the most revolutionary and successful religious movements of our times

make certain affirmations about life and they organize rituals and holidays and mass moments through which the community reaffirms its commitment to these affirmations and acts out their fulfillment.

Religion is a universal phenomenon. You are religious, though you may not even acknowledge it. Religion is a universal phenomenon because all of us are conscious. Alone of all the things that live, human beings are aware that they are alive. All other living things respond instinctively to life. They simply survive or try to. Our nature forces us to wonder why. We have to ask what life is all about. We notice that life is full of contradictions; life is brief; life is bruising; there is injustice in human society; some have more; some have less; some are born with more talent, some less. Why? What can we, what should we do about it? We begin to wonder what life is and what death is and as to the purpose of all our exertions. We ask whether, in fact, what we believe to be right is right. Every human being is religious because we are aware of being alive and desperately need to resolve the contradictions of existence. We need to know that there is a way that we ought to go, a way which gives meaning and grace to life. We need to know that life is more than confusion.

The basis of religion is the emotional need to feel that we are living significantly.

The key terms in religion are deliverance, salvation, redemption. "Out of the depths

I called unto the Lord and He answered me with great encouragement." Salvation may

signify the promise of life in the hereafter, but this is only one possible form of the

saving promise that mankind will solve its problems and the massurance that what I am

doing is dignified, worthy of me, and permanent value. Thou do I know that my way

is significant and right? There is no way of proving the point. That is why religion goes

beyond philosophy. These questions are not theoretical questions, questions which are asked cooly and can be answered cooly. At the base of all religions is what the psychologists call the will to believe. Religious questions are hot questions, asked by all out of the common need to have answers that resolve the contradictions and provide coherence to our lives. Once we have such answers we will not let loose of them because of their importance to us. They integrate our personality and provide strength and sanity. We gamble our lives upon them. On the most basic of levels, these slavific ideas define us.

Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Bhuddism, Marxism, Maoism and, yes, the Moonies and the People's Temple each present a set of salvific answers and redemptive ritual which provide coherence, a purpose, a sense of redemption, to their members. There is no such thing as a rational faith. After we have the faith we may reason about it, and we can sometimes reason ourselves out of dysfunctional commitments, but at the basis of every faith, every life, lies a set of unprovable axioms, assumptions about human dignity, human worth, love, society, value, consciousness, purpose, the future, life or death, what lies beyond the grave. . .

All people are religious; but, obviously, all do not go to synagogue or to church. There are religions whose ideology is political and economic rather than spiritual. The religious need is universal, but not everyone of us has the same degree of need. There are some who share rather calmly the majority faith and others who feel that they have a truth which is not yet understood by the larger society. These are aflame with convictions which tend to make more comfortable religionists uncomfortable. Often these intense religionists are condemned as fanatics, but I find the label a bit disturbing. After all, one man's fanaticism is another man's principle. I often find that I tend to label somebody a fanatic when I cannot argue him around to my point of view. If we believe that there are principles in life - and we do - if we believe in the value of commitment to principles - as we do - at what point do commitment and principle add up to fanaticism?

Some have been troubled that the people in Jonestown went out to establish a socialist rural commune, Zion, in Guyanna. It seems a slap at America, but are we really the Promised Land? More seem to be troubled that these true believers were willing to commit suicide for their dream. Let me suggest an analogy which may help us understand their mass suicide. I know that some seem to have fought against drinking the fatal drink and that there were goons in the People's Temple who shot some who pulled back. Yet, knowing what I do about religious ecstasy, I suspect that most willingly, calmly drank the Kool-Aid and cyanide. Of course, even as I offer this analogy, I must say le-havdil.

Many of you have been on top of Masada. It provides a beautiful seer view of the valley of the Dead Sea and the eastern slope of the Judean Hills. What is of interest to us is that Masada today is one of the central religious shrines of modern Israel. Until 1948 Masada had no emotional meaning whatsoever for the Jewish people. The palace atop the cliff had been built by Herod, certainly the most hated home-grown tyrant of our history. The people who held out here against the Romans and ultimately committed suicide rather than surrender were not universally acclaimed as heroes. The rabbis had not sympathized with the zealots' insistence on war with Rome and did not approve of or applaud their final act of mass suicide. Rabbinic law surrounds suicide with all manner of taboo. We are to live for our faith, not die for it. Until the last thirty years no one thought of Masada as a holy place. I can understand how Masada emerged as a major tourist attraction. The scenery is beautiful. There are old and interesting ruins. But why did it emerge as a holy place? Masada became a holy place because a hundred million Arabs out there talked about jihad, a holy war, to drive the Israelis out into the sea. Masada became a holy place because Israel felt threatened. All they valued and prized was threatened.

The Israelis needed a compelling myth and ritual moments which would allow them to project what it would be like if the Israelis, in fact, had to lay down their lives for their faith and people. Masada was a pledge, a fantasy, a commitment, a foretaste of death. Today the paratroopers of the Israeli Army receive their wings in a firelight ceremony on top of Masada. In so doing, they pledge their willingness to die for their country's right to survive. Le-havdil, there is an analogy here to the white night rehearsals in Jonestown.

The last time I was on Masada I watched a Hasidic Jew bring up a sefer Torah for a Bar Mitzvah in the little synagogue which has been designated among the ruins. I thought to myself about life's unexpected twists. Here in this fortress built by a tyrant, sacredness prevails not because of long centuries of veneration, but because this place plays a mythically critical role in modern Jewish life. Here is Israel's desperate will to live and the recognition that you must sometimes die that your hopes may survive.

The Jonestown people were few. They had been conditioned to believe that they were threatened by exposure from abroad, by satanic forces, by an overwhelming enemy. They believed without reservation in the rightness of their cause. They were heirs of a tradition which had long taught that Christianity was founded on the blood of martyrs. I can imagine the myth that was woven for them: if they had to die their death would be a consecration from which the greater People's Temple would emerge. I am not at all surprised that there were White Nights, rehearsals for the ghastly event, and that they had drunk the Kool-Aid on those nights as willingly as they drank the cyanide on that final night. They saw themselves as martyrs. What had they besides the Temple? Was not the Temple more precious than life itself; a vision, purpose, their integrity, their humanity, their dream, salvation?

Another le-havdil, imagine a Martian, one who is not like us, come among us who reads the history of Jews in the Middle Ages, the long, sad chronicle of those of our

martyrs who were killed by Crusaders and Cossacks. Might not the Martian be moved to ask a simple question: Why did these Jews not accept baptism? Had they, they would have lived. Holy water cannot drown the soul, their inner life would have been the same after baptism as before. Why didn't they save their lives? Why were they so stubborn? You cannot apply dispassionate logic to life. Had those Jews converted they would have given up all that had meaning for them - their sense of dignity, their sense of purpose, the sense of a close relationship with God, their sense of family, their sense of amour propreall that gave coherence to their lives would have been destroyed by the act of conversion. To convert would have been to cease being themselves and that is a far worse fate than death - so they became martyrs.

Faith is a powerful emotional current. Be honest with yourself: if our vaunted security, prosperity and power were to disappear, if suddenly we were ruled by those wh demanded that we agree with their economic theories and political ideologies we, too, might make some desperate stand for the values, the dignity, the sense of self which we now. To do less would be to be untrue to ourselves. Perhaps our act would be hapless, but there are values each of us cannot and will not compromise.

Religion is. Religion is neither good nor bad. The value to be attached to any religion depends upon its teachings, the commitments we make, the structure of its institutions. The church and the faith of the Crusaders was both the same and quite different from the church and the faith of St. Francis.

Unfortunately, the news media have made a distinction where distinctions ought not to be made. They have distinguished between cult and religion. Cults include people and traditions we do not like: the Moonies, the Church of God, the People's Temple. Religions include people and traditions we approve: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and their representations. May I remind you that until the fatal night the People's Temple remained

between a cult and a religion is not one which would llow the separation of good religious institutions and bad ones and but one of intensity. Cults are singly groups of religious people who are a little hotter about their faith than ordinary groups of religious teachings seriously while most who are affiliated with the mainline congregations take religious teachings prudentially.

In the history of mankind cults have emerged in every culture, every tradition, every part of the world and in every age. Cults are like sun spots which signal an eruption of solar energy. Sometimes there are more eruptions and sometimes less, but there is always an outflow of power from the source. Whenever the mainline traditions cool down or whenever the society is convulsed, cults appear, demanding a transvaluation of values, demanding a new commitment to God or a new commitment to justice or to freedom bearing a compelling dream. Most cults are like Jonah's gourd: they appear in the night and disappear in a night. Some abort. Some explode. A few emerge and become mainline religions. I assure you that when Jesus and his disciples wandered about the Galilee the honest burghers of Tiberias discussed them as bizarre'cultists. Imagine, they believed that the world was about to end and refused to care about the ordinary civic and business responsibilities. I assure you that when the Pharisees first appeared and refused to eat at any other table but one set by one of their own they, too, were put down as cultists. Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism emerge from cults.

What distinguished Jesus' followers and the early Pharisees as cults. They

took their religion with terrible seriousness. Jesus believed that the Kingdom of God

was at hand. His followers were willing to leave family and occupation behind. The

Pharisees believed that all Jews were priests, that Judaism was to be a democratic

rather than heirarchical tradition, and they acted to make it so. Here is the key. Cult

people are fully committed people. Most religionists are modestly committed. Cult people are intense. Most religionists balance committeet with common sense. A cultist's religious life is all consuming. Most folk have a family life and a workaday life and turn to their religious institution for congregation, for encouragement, for reassurance, for the myth of salvation; but these concerns have limits.

Nothing I have said should be construed as suggesting that the People's Temple was benevolent or that its actions should be approved. I am simply asking you to understand how religious people, that is, people like us could become involved with such a group. It began as a noble, if naive, dream. Jones' original ideas had a noble ring to them. But like so many other cults, the leader was not equal to his talk and was corrupted by his power and so these cultists, magnetized by a leader, were led to perdition. Blessed the cult whose leader dies before corruption enters his soul. Jesus died young. Interestingly, those cults which emerge usually are distinguished by the fact that the founder died young. The founder's death is often the most blessed event in a cult's development.

Imagine what might have happened with the People's Temple if on one of his trips from San Francisco to Guyanna the Rev. Jim Jones had been killed when his plane crashed in the jungle. The community was in Zion. Concord and now marmony were in place. There was a farm. There would have been survivors. There would have been a struggle for power. The question of succession to the original leader is the most crucial problem in the early life of a cult community. All depends upon the quality of those who emerge as leaders, whether these are dedicated to their own vision or to the ideal for which the dead leader supposedly stood. A legend would have emerged about Jim Jones. To the cultivity he would have become another Moses or Jesus. If the group had grown it ultimately would have developed into a mainline religion and no one would have known that this capacity for suicidal violence had shadowed its beginnings.

On Route 306, just a few miles from here in Kirtland, stands the original Mormon

Temple. Joseph Smith's life and that of Jim Jones are remarkably similar. When Joseph Smith, who is the founder of the Latter Day Church of Jesus Christ, was a young man he lived near Palmyra in upper New York State. Smith came into his adolescence in the late 1810's when the Finger Lake district was a rather lonely place which had few established institutions. Most of those who had come were those who had not established themselves on the Atlantic Seaboard, the less capable, the less literate, the less educated and the perennialy unsuccessful. Joseph Smith was the eighth of nine children. He was a tall, good-looking lad, blessed or cursed with a gift of gab. As a youth he loved to mimic the Evangelical preachers who swarmed over the countryside, making up for the lack of an established clergy. Smith had a special charisma. In upper New York State the great sport was peering at stones. They would find a translucent or opaque stone and, using it as a crystal ball, peer in it to discover where the Spaniards had hidden the gold they had taken from the Indians. Smith had a special talent for making others believe his stones really could find gold. He led many a group into the woods to where the Spaniards had the continued to be a norgest peeren Thousand buried their gold. No gold was ever found.

One day Smith had a conversion experience. An angel spoke with him. Some years later the same angel led him to golden tablets written in some archaic script.

Smith alone saw these tablets and he alone could translate them. That translation became the Book of the Mormon. Many neighbors were fascinated. They were country folk in need of community. Fortunately, the book emphasized the values of thrift, integrity, hard work, shared labor and neighborliness which they held dear. A number joined the young man in his new faith and he soon led them away from unproductive farms to Zion if you can imagine Kirtland, Ohio being Zion. They pooled their money, bought large tracts to fland and helped each other and. Here power began to corrupt the soul of young Joseph Smith. He organized a bank with money collected from his people. Unfortunately, he

failed to get a charter for the bank and managed it according to angelic inspiration. It ultimately went bankrupt. When investors became angry, Smith and his flock went to Missouri. Again, they bought land and set to farming. Here the religious leader, to protect his folk and impose orthodoxy, organized the Danites, a goon squad, and armed them. During this period the angel often spoke and told him, among other advice, that though marriage is sacred, a man and woman are sealed for life, the leader was allowed SUMUCISOTHE SIMPLE FOLK many wives. Leaders enjoy prerogatives, Indeed, political reality had led most folk to identify the leader by his privileges. When Missouri forced Joseph Smith out, he and his flock settled in southern Illinois in a town called Nauvoo. The Democratic governor of Illinois gave Smith a wide ranging charter which made him literally the commander-inchief of this little community. Why? Smith could and did deliver 1500 Democratic votes. But, finally, Smith's love of personal power went beyond what the community could sustain. Not only did he flaunt his several wives, but he had his goons smash the local press which, run by a Mormon dissenter, had begun to raise questions about Smith's apostleship. Finally, the Governor of Illinois had to initiate an investigation. The threatened leader paraded his militia. His address has been recorded: "Will you follow me to the death?" "Aye." "Tis well you said so, for had you not promised to follow me to the death I would have left you and found myself a nobler people. " I, the leader, I more classic threat of the leader to leave. Religion had become a personality cult - but no less a religion.

The final act of Joseph Smith's life is quite different from that of Jim Jones'.

History never repeats itself. Joseph Smith fled only across the Mississippi, but he had not gone far when the disciples caught up with him and remonstrated: "You can't leave this way. We are falling apart. You have to come back." Trapped by his own, accomp-

lishment, a leader always is, Smith returned to Nauvoo. He was arrested and sent to Carthage, Illinois where he was put under house arrest. That night Smith and his brother were lynched. Instead of mass suicide, martyrdom. Smith ended his career as the martyr around which Brigham Young and the survivors built the Mormon Church. Today there are three million Mormons. We think of them as responsible and respectable citizens, among the most conservative element in our population. Out of a community of the credulous, a respected community.

A cult is simply a group of people who are dead serious about their beliefs. We must learn to say <u>le havdil</u> between certain sets of beliefs and other sets of beliefs; but the difference is in the substance of the beliefs, not in the act of believing. Judaism has spawned cults and some of these cults, like the Pharisees, have been among the most formative elements in the development of our religious tradition. If you care what will happen to the People's Temple, I would suggest that it will go on, perhaps led by people who never knew Jim Jones or who were not part of the original People's Temple. After all, Paul never met Jesus. Why do I think so? Let me give you a bit of our own history.

In the seventeenth century the Cossacks, under Boodan Chmielnitzsky, emerged out of Ukraine, determined to plunder Europe. In the process they killed one out of every three Jews living in eastern Europe. At this time a messiah rose among our people by the name of Shabbatai Zvi. Shabbatai was a Turkish Jew. He had been born in Smyrna. Shabbatai was a Kabbalist who taught that the end of the world was at hand and that the terrible devastations which were occurring were the wars of Gog and Magog, Armageddon, signs of the birth pangs of the messiah. People acclaimed him messiah. From all over Europe and Africa, Jews flocked to Jerusalem to be with Shabbatai when the messianic age would dawn. For a while the Ottoman Turks were rather patient. Then they began to fear that the thousands who came might become an army which would oppose the regime. Shabbatai was imprisoned. The Sultan finally decided to give him the choice between death and

conversion to Islam. Faced with the choice, this messiah committed the most unmessianic of all acts. He became a Muslim. You would think that once the messiah of the Jews had become a Muslim this particular drama would end, that everyone would be convinced that he was not the messiah. Not so. Throughout the world largish groups continued to worship in the Sabbatarian tradition and to proclaim Shabbatai Zvi as the messiah. Ready explanations were at hand. He had converted to fulfill the messiah's role only to go into the darkness in order that light might be brought out of the darkness. He was the suffering servant whose pains vicariously and necessarily atoned for Israel's sins. By conversion Shabbatai witnessed to the degradation he was willing to undergo in order to proclaim the salvation of God. Until this century, a group in Constantinople, called the Donmeh, continued to worship Shabbatai Zvi as messiah. By definition messiahs are resurrected. The tomb is always empty. People need to believe.

The People's cult will not die easily despite the exposure of Jones' crude commercialization. It has had the publicity that excites. At the same time it will not become a major religion, it is too bizarre.

My hope is that all of us have been saddened by this evidence of human culpability and human credulity and have come to recognize the irrationality which binds us to our particular faith and the need for that bind. At the very center of our being there lies a set of values on which we gamble our lives, values which give meaning, coherence, direction, a sense of redemption to our lives. We are all religious and we need to find in our religious institutions confirmation, encouragement, sensitivity as to these values. I hope all of us will learn to say <u>le havdil</u>. It does matter where we belong. It does matter in what tradition we raise our children.

Let me end with this. I am less worried about the cults than about the trend towards intensity which is emerging among the mainline churches. Cults appeal to a few. Conversion to a cult is usually a time-limited affair. I am more disturbed that the mainline

traditions responding to the confusions of our time, future shock, to our increasing sense that life is beyond us, seem to be turning more and more to authority, turning back to "this is the way, here is the truth". People are taking the faith more intensely and more literally. We seem to be giving up on that which was unique in most of the liberal religious movements of the nineteenth and twentiety century, the affirmation that each individual has the God-given right and need to be discriminating in his/her commitments and to make up his/her own mind; and that even when you make up your mind that there is no absolute certainty that you are right. We gamble our lives on certain values, but there is no way of proving that those values are right. The hope was to create a religious man who was humble enough to hold on to principle without becoming a missionary, to be committed without becoming immoderate. The rise of mainline evangelism brings that hope into question.

Le-havdil, we must try as best we can to separate those religious movements which consecrate life from those religious movements which are destructive of life. If you learn nothing else from this experience but this, it is a good bit; religion is not good, religion is not bad, religion simply is.

Kaddish

Friday DEC. 3, 1978

Those who passed away this week

HARRY D. GOODRICH ESTELLE BERNSTEIN Rose Friedman

Yahrzeits

FLORENCE BENSON DUBOY ABRAM B. EFROYMSON NORMAN S. COPELAND RENETTA DIAMOND FANNIE H. WEBBER RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER MICHAEL J. MARGOLIS PHIL MELDON STELLA S. KOLLER DAVID SAFIER ANN FRANKEL MINA LEVÍN (accent, Syllade) ARTHUR WALLACH ABRAM M. KAPLAN ABRAHAM G. SCHOCK CHARLES A. STONE ANNA BROWN RYNETTE LOIS KRAUS FLORENCE STERN CAMILLA W. KRAUS HARRY C. KATZ JEROME A. LEVY

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## Your TEMPLE Calendar - Clip and Save

26000 SHAKER BOULEVARD 831-3233

	SUN	MON	TUES	WED	THURS	FRI	SAT
	SERVICES 10:30 a.m. The Temple Branch Rabbi Silver will speak on THE UGLY FACE OF RE- LIGION – JONESTOWN 4th Grade Open House 3rd Grade Retreat	COPING VI COPING WITH YOUR CONVICTIONS Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver 8:00 p.m Branch	TWA FIRST TUESDAY 11 a.m Shop & Socialize 12 Noon - Lunch 1 p.m The Belvoir Singers Priowship & Study Group Rabbi Stephen Klein 10:45 a.m Branch Mr. & Mrs. Club Board Meeting - 8:00 p.m.	6	7	Services - 5:30 p.m. The Temple Chapel	Shabbat Services 9:45 a.m Branch
	SERVICES 10:30 a.m. The Temple Branch Rabbi Silver will speak on JOSEPH 3rd Grade Open House 4th Grade Retreat Come to Life Contest	# Drainer	TWA Activities 10:00 a.m Branch  Fellowship & Study Group Rabbi Stephen Klein 10:45 a.m Branch  Temple Board Meeting 8:00 p.m Branch	13 -IS	14 RICAN JEWISH C H I V E S	Services - 5:30 p.m. The Temple Chapel	Shambat Services 9:45 a.m Branch  WINNERS ANNOUNCED FOR BOOKS COME TO LIFE CONTEST
	17 SERVICES 10:30 a.m. The Temple Branch Rabbi Silver will speak  TWA-TMC MUSIC, MUSIC, MUSIC 8:00 p.m Branch	18	TWA Activities 10:00 a.m Branch  Fellowship & Study Group Rabbi Stephen Klein 10:45 a.m Branch  Religious School Board Meeting 8:15 p.m Branch	TMC Board Meeting 8:00 p.m Branch	21	Services - 5:30 p.m. The Temple Chapel	Winter Vacation Begins
	24 SERVICES 10:30 a.m. The Temple Branch COLLEGE REUNION SERVICE	25 First Day Chanukah	26 No TWA Activities No Fellowship & Study Group  COLLEGE REUNION Sherry Hour 1:00 p.m Branch WINTER VACATION	ON - NO CLASSES	28	29	30
	Mr. and Mrs. Club HANUKKAH HAPPENING					Services - 5:30 p.m. The Temple Chapel	