

(including “We the People”, the “Neighborhoods” project, and “A House Divided”) become Lewis’s main characters. The “real-life” constraints of institutional change are homogenized and generalized. Greater attention to personal accounts would have revealed more of the contests and conflicts typical of any institution in transition and like-

ly would have been more instructive for those who want to learn from the CHS’s example.

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Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America

Edited by Rebecca Moore, Anthony B. Pinn, and Mary R. Sawyer

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004. Pp. xvii, 204. Notes, charts, tables, index. \$49.95.)

More than a quarter century after its tragic demise in the jungles of British Guyana, the Peoples Temple and its charismatic leader, the Reverend Jim Jones, continue to fascinate scholars. This collection of essays attempts to understand Jones’s messianic movement and its implications for the sociology, politics, and history of African American religion.

According to the editors, while previous scholarship about the Peoples Temple and Jonestown acknowledges the heavy participation of African Americans, it fails “to explore in a substantive way the implications of these demographics,” especially the numerous ways that the predominantly white leadership of the Peoples Temple “emulated Black Church culture in style and form, and to some extent, in substance” (p. xiii).

The book comprises ten chapters, each of which can be read as a stand alone article, though they vary in purpose as well as quality. Some of the

most insightful and provocative among them, such as those authored by Anthony B. Pinn, Mary R. Sawyer, and Milmon Harrison, appear to have been written specifically for this volume. Others chapters, written by J. Alfred Smith and Muhammed Kenyatta, were written shortly after the Jonestown tragedy. Additional contributions, one by the late C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, another by Archie Smith, Jr., represent two early examples of scholars’ attempts to understand the implications of the Peoples Temple for the study of the black American religious experience. Tanya Hollis and co-authors Duchess Harris and Adam Waterman examine the political and social activism that characterized the Temple during its halcyon days in the Mendocino Valley and San Francisco Bay area.

Of particular note is Rebecca Moore’s attempt to create a collective biography of the movement’s membership. Her demographic evidence

strongly suggests that Jonestown “was a racially black community in a number of key respects” (p. 57). Not only did African Americans make up a majority of the Jonestown enclave, but black senior citizens’ social security checks also comprised a major source of income for Jonestown for nearly a year. Finally, Moore argues—on the basis of rather slim organizational chart evidence—that African Americans held key leadership positions in the jungle outpost. Even less convincing is her claim that, culturally speaking, the Peoples Temple was a black religious group.

This is the crux of the book’s main argument: That the Peoples Temple represented one of several modalities of the black American religious tradition. Ultimately, this claim requires careful analysis of racial and institutional identity, and in this respect the book falls sadly short of its intended purpose. The fact that Jones borrowed liberally from Father Divine’s Peace Mission, that he employed elements of traditional black American religious culture in his services, or that the majority of his followers were African American no more imparts a black religious identity to the Peoples Temple than the appropriation of African American youth culture by Coca-Cola or Nike makes these corporate entities authentically black. This methodological flaw—viewing black religious style as synonymous with black religious substance—is evident throughout most of the book (except for

Smith’s chapter, which casts serious doubt not only on the characterization of Peoples Temple as a representation of the black religious tradition, but also on whether it was a church at all).

Not much in *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America* can be identified as truly new scholarship. Nearly half of the ten chapters have been previously published. Devotees of Indiana history will note the absence of any in-depth analysis of the movement’s beginnings in Indianapolis. If, as Wordsworth believed, the child is father of the man, then the Temple’s Hoosier origins should provide valuable clues to its later growth in California and eventual self-destruction in Guyana, as well as help us to understand the eventual descent into madness of its self-appointed leader. Unfortunately, this book remains eerily silent on these questions.

Moore, Pinn, and Sawyer admit that their book “is not intended as a definitive treatment of Peoples Temple.” They “hope other scholars will respond to the challenge to enlarge our understanding of this multifaceted movement and the people who found meaning in it” (p. xvii). This reviewer hopes so, too.

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