**Wicca and People’s Temple**

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**Introduction**

New Religious Movement, or as some people refer to as Cults, started to emerge in the 1960s (Dawson 2006: 25). Many New Religious Movements (NRMs) originated from major religions like Christianity. Many onlookers think that “cults” are often violent and have apocalyptic beliefs which put constant in doubts and questions of NRMs. Within these NRMs there is a social identity that separates their association from mainstream religion and society. However, NRMs have different or sometimes similar, sets of beliefs, practices, rituals, etc. to mainstream religions. These new religions influence every aspect of their followers’ lives (Dawson 2006: 25). There is not a single definition of religion, or sects and cults, which is agreed on by all Sociologists. There are however some common characteristics observed within cults like; having a charismatic leader, claim to have mysterious knowledge of the world, loosely organized and to offer a clearer and more sure way to salvation (Dawson 2006: 29). In this essay two NRMs, Wicca and People’s Temple, will be compared on some of their core believes, practices and ways they are organized.

**Wicca**

The first NRM researched was Wicca. They can also refer to themselves as Pagans (Hume 1998: 311). They have “diverse and vibrant” religious activities and also practice under various forms (Gallagher 2004: 164). This movement came to America from England in the 1960s (Clifton 2006: 165). This overall Pagan movement has become much bigger in size since the 1980s (Clifton 2006: 165). In the 70s there was only a handful of Wicca in America (Allen 2001:18). There were never any published member statistics but, researchers have guessed anywhere from the high hundred thousands to the low millions (Clifton 2006: 164). The people of Wicca call themselves Witches but make sure that it is capitalized to distinguish them from the negative connotations that comes with the word (Allen 2001:18). “Wiccans tend to be white, middle-class, highly educated, and politically involved in liberal and environmental causes (Allen 2001:18). People that observed Wicca noted that almost all members where avid readers regardless of their education level but, those with poor verbal skills could still make you a good witch but you would be excluded from a lot of community activities (Clifton 2006: 13). This is because the primary way of communication and transmitting traditions is through text instead of face to face (Clifton 2006: 15). The internet at this time was a new way to conduct the religion at all times and also attracts the younger generations who have unlimited access. It was a way to provide virtual seminars and connect people for larger rituals for this multigenerational movement (Clifton 2006: 166). “Generational patterns not only have significant in terms of individual-level beliefs and practices but also have implications for the religious organizations that have to adapt got generational shifts” (Yamane and Roberts 2012: 104). Another way of communication that was face to face was festivals. At these festivals people could interact with each other while sharing songs and rituals (Clifton 2006: 163). This is a very oral religion directly related to the sacredness of the world (Arthur 2008: 199). They have also “enhanced the growth and diversity of the religion” (wicca.org 2006). They truly believe that Earth was a deity and a personified living this and that all life was sacred and embodied within Earth (Arthur 2008: 202). They practice a religious ecology which means they believe that the natural world is a part of the deities who created it (Hume 1998:311). Wicca is a ‘nature religion’ which values and learns from nature or an “earth-based spiritual community”; these new developments were then transmitted back to England where Wicca began (Clifton 2006: 165). Spirituality is the utmost good and there is no ‘devil’ even though they are often accused of interacting with the devil (Allen 2001:20). They believe that it is possible to move past the physical restrictions to an altered state of consciousness to physically connect to unseen energies. By focusing on the mind one can become a conduct for energy (Hume 1998:312). They engage in practice both physically and mentally to create sacred spaces (Hume 1998:312). There are a broad range of approaches to the divine (Hume 1998: 311).

Even though there is no official text for Wicca, there are four explicit doctrines to be followed: 1) The Ultimate Deity (which is unknown) is imminent and transcended. 2) Every living entity has a spirit which is connected to and part of every other spirit; humans are a part of nature. 3) Divinity manifests itself through all living beings; nature itself is divine, as is the cosmos. 4) God and Goddess images are recognized as aspects of a greater divinity (wicca.org 2006). Wicca has an ethical prophecy that is proven in the Wiccan Rede which states “If it harms none, do what you will” (wicca.org 2006). This is because they don’t have a personal God (Weber 1968: 448). They also have a symbol with a star inside a circle with the one point up and two pointed down. This represents the five major beliefs of Wicca which are the Wiccan Rede, the Law of Attraction, Harmony and Serenity, Power(energy) Through Knowledge and Progressive Reincarnation (wicca.org 2006). The Wicca Circle is the Wiccan Cosmology (Hume 1998:313). They value freedom and harmlessness (Melton 1986: 213). Wicca is most likely still going strong because it gives practitioners a feeling to the natural world and to believe their bodies are beautiful and sacred (Allen 2001:22). They believe is having a natural balance within life (Arthur 2008: 205). The way in which they practice can differ. There is not an actual ‘place’ or institution for worship to take place. Worship can either be alone or in groups called covens which can have 4-26 members, ideally with 13 (Melton 1986: 213). Each service is scheduled based on the phases of the moon, meeting when it is both new and full every month (wicca.org 2006). There are eight major solar festivals in which many covens come together and worship (Melton 1986: 214). Every worship site is constructed from scratch each time there is a meeting. The site is made up of consecrated circles and can be located anywhere with only coven members allowed in the innermost circle (wicca.org 2006). “Rituals are performed to celebrate the seasons, to honor the deities, be one with nature, attain self-realization and initiate participants into the mysteries, and for magical and healing purposes” (Hume 1998:312). Their sacred space can be constructed anywhere (Hume 1998:314). The practice of magic is “the art of change using the cosmic power that underlies the universe” (Melton 1986: 213). There is no good or evil magic but is judged based on the intentions of the witch performing. This is a unique example of a NRM in that is has a more acceptance toward individualism. Scholars believe that “Wicca traditions continue to challenge many assumptions about NRMs, for they lack a single charismatic leader, apocalyptic messages and the rigid separation between ‘them’ and us’” (Clifton 2006: 165).

**People’s Temple**

The second NRM analyzed in this paper is People’s Temple. This was a quite popular topic when the group committed a mass murder/suicide leaving 918 Americans dead in Guyana on November 18, 1978 (Dickerson 1998). Unlike most NRMs, People’s Temple started in the 1950s and in the Midwest due to extreme racism (Richardson 1980:321). Starting when NRMs were really beginning to emerge in the 1960s, People’s Temple was made up of 20% African-American, located in Indianapolis, which drew attention to the group because it was only of the only interracial congregations in the state of Indiana (Dickerson 1998). The leader, Jim Jones, was very charismatic and used charm as his power (Ulman 1983:642).. In 1969, about 50 members moved to a place in California called Redwood Valley where they built their own church called Happy Acres (Maaga 1998: 3). This is when Jones started to recruit young college-educated whites to join People’s Temple (Dickerson 1998). Also at this time is when the Temples political and social activism led them to expand into San Francisco and attract lower class African-Americans (Dickerson 1998). Jones had the belief that the media was one of their worst enemies which then gave him the idea to move the group to Guyana. He got this idea when reading a magazine that said Guyana was one of the safest places to be in the event of a nuclear war (Maaga 1998: 2). The transition to Guyana began in 1974 when they were granted a lease from the Guyana government to develop 4000 acres and by 1975 there were 50 members were now living in the town they named Jonestown (Maaga 1998: 4). Jonestown was a utopian community that was supposed to be an agricultural project (Dickerson 1998). In 1977 more than 1000 members where living in Jonestown with two-thirds of the population being minors or senior citizens (Maaga 1998: 4). Jones’ charismatic leadership caused the mass movement to be preserved by displacing hostility toward other groups and cause paranoia among individuals within the group (Ulman 1983:645). People were deterred from leaving this isolated place by having Jones tell them of tigers and human enemies in the jungle that they would have to face to get to a plane or boat, the only way to leave (Richardson 1980:245). “Ideology was focused on commitment to the community and to elevating the group above the individual”. Everyone contributed in the community and sometimes they would work 10 hour long days 6 days a week (Dickerson 1998). People mainly lived in dorms and children often raised apart from their biological parents. Their diets were minimal and consisted of beans and rice; only when there were visitors was there meat and greens (Dickerson 1998). His rule was not questioned and he looked at himself as the only legit object of sexual desire (Kilduff 1978: 155). For this reason he stated he was the only one to have sex with both men and women even though he considered himself the only ‘perfect heterosexual’ in People’s Temple (Kilduff 1978: 53). Family ties within the church were under Jones’ control and he could make people end marriages and arrange others (Kilduff 1978: 53). His obsession with diet also led him to take “vitamin pills” that he carried in a briefcase for headaches, to wake up, to go to sleep, to stay asleep and to be chill all prescribed by his on-staff doctor (Kilduff 1978: 57). He created uniforms for the members to attend services when they were located in Redwood and San Francisco that consisted of: red shirts, black ties and slacks for men and red shirts and long black skirts for women (Kilduff 1978: 60). Since Jones was the top leader there was a second level of inner circle advisors, about 12-20 and a third level of 100 people that were the Planning Commission and within this third level was an elite circle with around a dozen secretaries and counselors (Kilduff 1978: 61). His true control was seen in different events leading to the mass suicide like a meeting when he made all of the members drink kool-aid and then saying it was poisoned. This was a false statement and after 45 minutes when everyone was suppose to die he claimed it was a test of faith that had to be done (Kilduff 1978: 62). Beating were a main form of punishment to members however, Jones rarely did the actual beating and instead watched (Kilduff 1978: 63). He truly deprived the members of their personal possessions by promising them a new world to work toward. He “attracted those who wanted to forget the realities” (Kilduf 1978:, 68). People’s Temple started as connected to society but soon became the opposite and was removed from the outside world (Richardson 1980:246). A group of former members and family members organized a group called the Concerned Relatives that was attempted to expose People’s Temple as a dangerous cult. They recruited help from Congressman Leo Ryan from California to make a trip to Jonestown and check it out (Maage 1998: 4). The Congressman had somewhat of a personal tie when he was confronted by a close friend who told him that he son mysteriously died one day after he left People’s Temple, which sparked his interested (Richardson 1980:245). The Congressman agreed and took a trip down with some fellow media. While down there he stated that it seemed to have change peoples’ lives in a positive way but that if any wanted to leave they could with him. On November 18, 1978, Ryan was getting ready to board the plane with some members of People’s Temple who wanted to leave when he was ambushed by a small group of People’s Temple and killed along with three media members (Dickerson 1998). After this incident Jones called the group together stating the end was now. Most of the members drank fruit punch with cyanide and tranquilizers, some injected and two shots leaving 918 dead (Dickerson 1998). This proved this to be an exemplary prophecy because the members followed whatever Jones said to do and by example (Weber 1968: 448). The interesting thing about Jones’ followers was that they were amazingly normal (Richardson 1980:240). “Even supporters of the right for people to choose nonmainstream religious groups mostly accept that People’s Temple is an example of the danger of too great a commitment to religious ideology as embodied in the person of a charismatic leader” and gave a negative connotations to NRMs (Maaga 1998: 1). The misleading aspects of the media made it seem as People’s Temple was very similar to all other NRMs, which is not really true (Richardson 1980:320).

**Comparison**

Some similarities between these two NRMs is the fact that researchers have concentrated on specific groups or large events within the religion. This doesn’t have an accurate overall picture of the particular religious movement in question. They had major difference such as Wicca not having a leader to People’s Temple had Jim Jones who was a very charismatic leader. Also, there was no organized hierarchy in Wicca, opposite in People’s Temple with three different levels. Wicca worshiped based on the phases of the moon and People’s Temple had no basis for worshiping. The most obvious difference is that Wicca is a very harmless group where People’s Temple was uncommonly violent and suicidal. This was a major controversy they caused for NRMs because of their violent ways. This made people believe that many NRMs had violent tendencies and that they would be willing to be violent to spread their word. This is of course not true for all NRMs, like Wicca which is a peaceful NRM. On the other hand, Wicca has not caused any major controversies with the NRMs.

These two movements are so different from each other that it would be silly to think all NRMs can be classified in one way. There are many different movements all with different practices and beliefs. One cannot just take the actions of a specific movement, like People’s Temple, and apply that to all NRMs cause it is very inaccurate. Many NRMs create a positive experience for people and should not be so judged and looked down upon.

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