

House of Judah, the Northeast Kingdom Community, and 'the Jonestown Problem': Downplaying Child Physical Abuses and Ignoring Serious Evidence

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Abstract^{1,2}

*This article offers a critique of the discussions concerning physical child abuse that occur in the standard academic sources on Peoples Temple and Jonestown—most especially John Hall's *Gone From the Promised Land*, which he published in 1987. Using accounts about children in Peoples Temple and Jonestown from personal accounts and respected journalistic sources, the article shows that sociological and religious-studies scholarship has downplayed the extent of the physical and emotional abuse that the children suffered prior to their murders. Moreover, some of this scholarship even has minimized the children's deaths themselves. Hall's discussion of corporal child punishment comes under special scrutiny, because he attempted to contextualize it by analogizing Jonestown's child punishment regimes to practices within both conservative Protestantism and two groups operating in the same period as Peoples Temple and Jonestown—the House of Judah and the Northeast Kingdom Community.*

The Jonestown³ deaths of November 1978 remain the most dramatic and tragic American 'cult event'⁴ to have occurred after the Second

World War, and a generation of people still remember the nightly news broadcasts of increasingly dire information as reporters and government officials struggled to make sense out of the bodies bloating in the sun. The generation of people who hold those memories, however, is aging (and, alas, dying—see R. Moore, 2000: 7–8), and at some point future generations will have to acquire information

followers). I am also aware of the early attempt by an opponent of the so-called anticult movement, James T. Richardson, to isolate Peoples Temple and Jonestown from the debate around new religions and cults. According to Richardson, most new religions developed in America during the 1960s or early 1970s; Peoples Temple began in the 1950s (Richardson, 1980: 241–242). Most new religions comprise Caucasians/whites; many of the Peoples Temple members were African Americans/black (Richardson, 1980: 242). Jones's organization was more authoritarian than most new religions (Richardson, 1980: 243–244). Peoples Temple grew more wary toward outside society over time, while most new religions become less wary of the dominant society over time (Richardson, 1980: 245–246). In a remarkable admission, Richardson acknowledged that some of the resocialization techniques that Peoples Temple used seemed to share "at least some important facets with the thought reform model developed by R. J. Lifton..." while most new religions used resocialization techniques closer to effective persuasion (Richardson, 1980: 247). Jones was a socialist, whereas the new religions "reflect Western culture's emphasis on individualism" (Richardson, 1980: 248). Jonestown's members were not crazy or brainwashed in committing suicide; they committed what Durkheimian sociologists call 'altruistic suicide' (Richardson, 1980: 249). In addition, new religions tended to be introversionist, whereas Peoples Temple attempted to involve itself in the political process (Richardson, 1980: 251). Finally, participants in most new religions engage in their groups' rituals sincerely and see symbolic meaning to their actions, while Jones probably "manipulated ritual behavior to accomplish his own ends" (Richardson 1980: 251). According to Richardson, even though Peoples Temple/Jonestown bore little relation to the new religions, those groups were under increasing pressure from deprogrammers, anticult groups, and even the Internal Revenue Service because of the inaccurate analogies between the two (Richardson, 1980: 252). Suffice it to say that no anticultist identifies a cult according to the ages of its members or the racial composition of the group. Nor does the time period in which a group emerges or flourishes influence a cultic designation. Moreover, authoritarian leadership is more pervasive than Richardson implied, which certainly can contribute to outsiders seeing a group as spurious and cultic. In fact, many groups do engage in politics in varying degrees, and now several of them also have committed murder/suicide. For anticultists, a major factor for labeling a group to be a cult is a determination of harm caused by group actions, and this very determination of harm often is what makes a group spurious in the eyes of many societal members.

¹ This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the International Cultic Studies Association conference on June 27, 2008, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

² Thanks go to Terra Manca and Ashley Samaha for their editorial suggestions.

³ The technical name of the group that followed Jim Jones (1931–1978) was Peoples Temple, and the community that Jones and more than a thousand of his followers established in Guyana was Jonestown. Often, however, people use Jonestown to refer to the entire movement, and at times I may be guilty of doing so myself.

⁴ I use the 'cult' term in a manner that is in line with standard dictionary (in this case, *Webster's*) definitions as both a religion that most people consider unorthodox and spurious, and a small circle of persons devoted to an intellectual figure. In simple terms, Jones's self-deification, harsh punishments, and fake healings made his movement unorthodox if not spurious in the eyes of many, and his combination of Christianity and Marxism made him something of an intellectual leader (at least in the eyes of his

about the tragedy through media and Internet sources. Thanks to the Internet, audio of Jim Jones's directives to his followers will survive electronically, as will many documentaries produced since the murder-suicides. Very little information from these sources, however, winds up in scholarship, since academics tend to rely upon the written word—especially the written word of earlier academics. Undoubtedly in the future, some academics will return to archives and mine information afresh, but until new research emerges, scholars and others will have to rely upon earlier publications in their efforts to understand the violent deaths of 918 people.⁵

Those of us who see Jonestown as the epitome of cultic control, manipulation, and abuse may find aspects of scholarship on that fateful community startling. The scholarship that I paid particular attention to appears in the book-length monographs that academics (people with appointments in colleges or universities) have produced on Jonestown, especially monographs published by university presses. For years I have been collecting these monographs, as well as journalistic, religious, and conspiratorial accounts about Jonestown and its demise. For this article, I supplemented my own collection with additional volumes that I obtained through my university's library (including from the Kent Collection on Alternative Religions), and I spent hours searching new- and used-book Internet sites for more titles (which I either purchased or ordered through interlibrary loan). I also checked bibliographies within the academic monographs.

Because in this article I am concerned about what subsequent generations will learn about Jonestown based upon existing scholarship, I wanted to identify which monographs are likely to have impact in the future. To determine books' likely impact, I checked (in mid-November 2009) the titles on the OCLC Online Union Catalog (WorldCat) database, which gives the names and total numbers of libraries around the world that own particular volumes. I

assumed that the greater a book's availability, the more likely that future generations will have access to it. Presented chronologically (according to date of publication), the sociology studies are: Ken Levi (ed.), *Violence and Religious Commitment: Implications of Jim Jones's Peoples Temple Movement* (1982; with a WorldCat count of 634);⁶ and John Hall's *Gone from the Promised Land: Jonestown in American Cultural History* (1987; with a WorldCat count at 842).⁷ Other academics wrote and edited additional sociological books about Jonestown but published them with Edwin Mellen Press—a publisher that received very bad media coverage in 1993 for the poor review and production standards that it applied to its products (St. John, 1993).⁸ Again in chronological order, the books are Judith Mary Weightman, *Making Sense of the Jonestown Suicides: A Sociological History of Peoples Temple* (1983; with a WorldCat count at 363);⁹ Rebecca Moore, *In Defense of Peoples Temple—and Other Essays* (1988; with a WorldCat count at 146); and two books edited by Rebecca Moore and her husband, Fielding M. McGehee III—*The Need for a Second Look at Jonestown* (1989; with a WorldCat count at 152); and *New Religious Movements, Mass Suicide, and Peoples Temple: Scholarly Perspectives on a Tragedy* (1989; with a WorldCat count at 202). A number of religious studies and

⁶ According to the book's cover, Ken Levi (PhD) taught sociology at the University of Texas at San Antonio at the time of the book's publication.

⁷ According to the back of the book, John R. Hall was an associate professor of sociology at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

⁸ St. John (1993: 22) referred to the Edwin Mellen Press as "a quasi-vanity press cunningly disguised as an academic publishing house....," and manuscripts did not go through a review process (St. John 1993: 24). Its owner, Herbert Richardson, used the press's proofreaders as a money-making enterprise and also "threatened to take a quarter out of the proofreaders' paychecks for every mistake they corrected past a certain number" (St. John, 1993: 23). Richardson sued St. John and *Lingua Franca* over the article but lost; and about a year after St. John's article appeared, St. Michael's College (which is part of the University of Toronto system) dismissed Richardson for "gross misconduct" (*Lingua Franca*, 2000). For a short analysis of the libel case between Edwin Mellen Press and *Lingua Franca* (albeit one published by Edwin Mellen Press), see Reid, 2006.

⁹ This book is a version of Weightman's 1983 Ph.D. dissertation from Drew University in Religion and Sociology entitled, *Breakdown in the Creation of a New Reality: A Sociological Analysis of the Peoples Temple*. A 1989 source suggests that she may not have remained in academia (Moore and McGehee [eds.] 1989: 249–250).

⁵ As indicated by Rebecca Moore, "[t]his number includes four of Congressman Leo Ryan's party—including Ryan himself—and one [Peoples] Temple member who were killed at the Port Kaituma airstrip outside Jonestown, and four Temple members who died in Georgetown [Guyana]" (Moore, 2004: 61).

interdisciplinary books also have appeared concerning Jonestown, and I will mention them later in this study.

Based upon the number of libraries worldwide that own copies of these sociological books, Hall's study of Jonestown appears destined to be the most influential in the coming years. Moreover, soon after its publication, several book reviews sang praise to its scholarship. "Hall's achievement is noteworthy.... [H]e presents the most comprehensive and sociological assessment of Peoples Temple available," said the review in *Contemporary Sociology* (Rigney, 1988: 469). Another proclaimed, "Hall's book is a triumph of scholarly craft and a skillful demonstration of the sociological viewpoint" (Christiano, 1989: 222). According to a third review, this study provided "the most compelling sociohistorical account to date of one of the more chilling horrors of modern times" (Snow, 1990: 1103); and a fourth reviewed concluded, "I have no doubt this work will be a standard in the field for years to come" (Wright, 1989: 94). More recently, three religious-studies scholars praised Hall's monograph as "the most complete and compassionate history of Peoples Temple to date" [Moore, Pinn, and Sawyer (eds.), 2004: xvii]. Certainly, Hall's study of Jonestown is a likely source to examine in an attempt to see what future generations of scholars will learn about and how they will interpret child-abuse issues within Jones's group. I begin, therefore, my analysis of scholarly representations about child abuse within Peoples Temple by examining his book.

The Discussion of Child Physical Abuse in John Hall's *Gone from the Promised Land*

Hall discussed child abuse issues far more than did other scholarly books, yet he (and for that matter, other scholars, too) diminished important issues of the physical (and psychological) abuse that the children at Jonestown endured prior to their murders. He minimized the deviance of the children's abuse by spuriously analogizing it to other punishment regimes in two contemporaneous groups (the House of Judah and the Northeast Kingdom Community), even though the regimes in those two groups actually

were themselves widely criticized (and in at least one case, fatal). Other scholarship on Jonestown attempts to humanize the people who died while placing considerable blame upon the group's countercult opponents (called the Concerned Relatives) for Jones's murderous response (see R. Moore, 1988: 3-26), but these attempts minimize the significance of the large number of infants, children, teens, and elderly who simply were murdered.

Hall's study was the product of extensive research, with his having gained information from the Guyanian government; the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Department of State; the California Historical Society; and the attorney for the Peoples Temple (Hall, 1987: x). Although the study has much to commend, it completely rejected any validity to what Hall called the anticult movement and its alleged reliance on atrocity tales (Hall, 1987: xiv-xviii). The anticult movement, he decided, "was ideological, no matter what its claims to scientific legitimation," partly because it targeted "culturally deviant and unpopular religions" but ignored "the more subtle (and perhaps more effective) coercion in mainstream religion" (Hall, 1987: 107).

Clearly, Hall was disinclined to provide any legitimation to the anticult movement. Moreover, his insistence that the movement relied upon atrocity tales to make its claims about coercion blinded him to the fact that people in the particular anticult movement against Jim Jones, called the Concerned Relatives, often were deadly accurate in their fearful predictions about the direction of his group (cf. Hall, 1995: 308 for mention of the group's credibility problem). In, for example, his complaint against Peoples Temple, former member James Cobb, Jr. accurately predicted the mass murder of children that would occur five months after he filed his papers in court. Cobb indicated that 'revolutionary suicide' was what Jones and Temple leadership were calling the action that the group would take if "Jones felt he was being persecuted or unduly harassed," but the action really "was a megalomaniacal threat of 'mass murder' which would result in the death of minor children not old enough to make voluntary and informed

decisions about serious matters of any nature, much less insane proposals of collective suicide" (Cobb v. Peoples Temple... 1978: 14). Despite this kind of accurate prediction, Hall's discussion of the group's punishment of children did not locate Peoples Temple's obvious abuses within a framework of anticult concerns, but rather attempted to place them within a context of conservative Protestantism. In doing so, however, Hall juxtaposed Peoples Temple with two other groups whose abusive practices had attracted considerable anticult attention and concern.

The forms of child abuse that Hall identified in Jonestown were numerous, but his accounts of the physical and psychological abuse of children and teens understated the severity of their group-inflicted punishments. Hall reported that, on one occasion, a Temple defector indicated that Jones's pathological cruelty manifested in "forcing a child to eat his own vomit" (Hall, 1987: 121). Child-beatings also took place by 1975, in which "children sometimes were subjected to extensive paddlings" in the context of public meetings in which the entire congregation agreed to them (of course, with Jones's approval [Hall, 1987: 122]). After parents signed release forms that supposedly absolved Peoples Temple from any liability for administering the paddlings, children received a wide range of what Hall called "whacks." "For example, 'several small boys received 'twenty-five whacks' for 'stealing cookies' in a supermarket" (Hall, 1987: 124). Another boy of indeterminate age "took 70 whacks" for calling a member "a crippled bitch" (Hall, 1987: 124). One teenager even asked Jones to "administer seventy-five whacks" for an offense that she believed she had committed, but Hall was not clear whether she ever received them (Hall, 1987: 123–124).

Beyond these paddlings, beatings, or whackings, Hall was imprecise about exactly what happened to children who faced punishment, saying only that they could expect to receive it

for stealing, for lying, acting
'irresponsibly,' making fun of people
for their handicaps, physically
threatening or attacking others,

especially adults, associating too
intimately with outsiders, and breaking
the laws of the larger society, especially
in ways that reflected on Peoples
Temple. (Hall, 1987: 123)

He mentioned boxing or wrestling matches as forms of punishment, but was not clear whether children (rather than just adults) had to endure them (Hall, 1987: 123, 124). Hall, for example, did not provide an age of "one 'cocky delinquent type'" who successfully fought several opponents before one beat him (Hall, 1987: 124).

Critiques of Hall's Accounts of Child Corporal Punishment

Two fundamental problems exist with Hall's account of the child abuse that occurred in Jonestown prior to the murders of the children. First, it seems highly likely that he dramatically under-presented what the children actually suffered. One of Hall's sources, cited in his bibliography, is Jeannie Mills's 1979 book, *Six Years with God: Life Inside Reverend Jim Jones's Peoples Temple*. Her accounts of beatings are explicit and numerous. Although Hall was vague about whether the teenager who supposedly requested "seventy-five whacks" got them (Hall, 1987: 123–124), Mills recounts in painful detail how Jones ordered and oversaw her daughter's beating with a board, seventy-five times, for hugging "a girlfriend whom Jim [Jones] considered to be a traitor" (Mills, 1979: 267).¹⁰ Mills's account of this public beating

¹⁰ Other differences exist between Hall's and Mills's accounts. Hall stated that the teenager Linda Mertle (who was Mills's daughter) "wrote a letter requesting seventy-five whacks for greeting a lesbian adult friend of the family who had left People's [sic] Temple several years earlier" (Hall, 1987: 123). Mills, however, made no mention of a letter requesting punishment, but instead said, "Our sixteen-year-old daughter Linda was called up for confrontation. She had hugged a girlfriend whom Jim considered to be a traitor. Linda stood before Jim and admitted that she was guilty."

"Jim looked at her sternly. 'You have been unwise, in the past, in your choice of friends, and it is important that we teach you a lesson you won't forget.... In order to help you learn this lesson, you will get seventy-five whacks with the board'" (Jones, quoted in Mills, 1979: 267).

Even if Hall is accurate in stating that Mertle wrote Jones and requested the beating, it still is outrageous that Jones had it carried out. Likewise, the sexual orientation of the person she hugged should have been of no consequence to anybody, and neither should the fact that she had left the group.

was only one of many. She indicated that large men beat children as young as four and five years old, sometimes as much as 150 times (Mills, 1979: 13). (As did Hall, she indicated that parents signed release forms prior to the public beatings, which reputedly gave Jones permission to carry them out [Mills, 1979: 260, 296].) During various periods in the group's history, children received beatings with boards (Mills, 1979: 53, 71, 289), belts (Mills, 1979: 254, 259), elm switches, and electric cables (Mills, 1979: 260). She also indicated clearly that, as punishment, Jones forced young children (as well as adults) into boxing matches (Mills, 1979: 53, 279). In one case, the group forced a young boy, whom an adult man had molested, to watch as punishers stripped the molester and beat him with a board "all over his body" (Mills, 1979: 48; see 71)—an account substantially confirmed by a later source (Layton, 1998: 61).¹¹ In addition, Mills also told the story, in far more detail than Hall, about the youngster whom Jones forced to eat his own vomit (Mills, 1979: 162). Another tale that she recounted, from a family who escaped the group and came to her, was about "young people [who] were forced to eat hot peppers or even have hot peppers put up their rectums as disciplines" (Mills, 1979: 79).

Finally, Mills recounted a punishment that a defector from Jonestown told her about, in which adults put children down a well (Mills, 1979: 81), which a later account about life in Jonestown confirmed (Layton, 1998: 177).¹²

¹¹ Layton did not mention the victim having to watch the beating, but she did recount that "There was the secret rubber hose beating of a member who had molested a Temple child. Father [i.e., Jones] made me watch the beating and had my photo taken holding the rubber hose, which paralyzed my questioning inner voice" (Layton, 1998: 61). Note that Mills said that the beating instrument was a board, while Layton indicated that it was a rubber hose.

¹² Layton wrote,

There was also the Well, a punishment used especially for children. They would be taken to the Well in the dark of night, hung upside down by a rope around their ankles, and dunked into the water again and again while someone hidden inside the Well grabbed at them to scare them. The sins deserving such punishment included stealing food from the kitchen, expressing homesickness, failing a socialism exam, or even 'natural' childish rebelliousness. Their screams were chilling but we had learned from the consequences of previous people's objections not to complain. (Layton, 1998: 176)

Reiterman with Jacobs contextualized the story about the well by placing it among other abuses that adults inflicted upon children and teens:

For younger children, punishment could be especially terrifying. At first Jones would threaten to turn disobedient children loose in the bush to see how long they would survive there by themselves. Those who continued to act up were blindfolded then lowered by rope into a well. Adults, on Jones's orders, would hide in nearby bushes or even in the bottom of the well, making noises and pretending to be monsters. (Reiterman with Jacobs, 1982: 394)

The authors further recounted the punishments Tommy Bogue, a teenager around sixteen years old, and another boy who tried to escape Jonestown suffered:

Once when Tommy Bogue and another boy ran off, a Temple search squad caught them near the railroad tracks to Matthews Ridge, then put the boys in leg irons. Back in Jonestown, their heads were shaved and they were forced under armed guard to cut logs into small pieces until Stephan Jones got his mother to intervene. (Reiterman with Jacobs, 1982: 294; see 551)

Subsequently, Bogue was among the people who tried to leave Jonestown with Congressman Leo Ryan, and he was shot in the leg (Reiterman with Jacobs, 1982: 551). Hall failed to mention that one of the wounded defectors was a teenager (see Hall 1987: 279).

Another one of Hall's sources also wrote about

a trench, roughly nine feet deep by nine feet square, where the slackers were dumped.... A few children who maintained they were sick and unable to work were lowered into that excavation and made to dig in the mud, first light till last light. (Reiterman with Jacobs, 1982: 357)

As far as I can determine, however, Hall also omitted these punishments in his rendition of physical abuses.

Child Corporal Punishment in Protestantism

If Hall had believed that the accounts of either Mills or Reiterman with Jacobs were inaccurate, then he could have criticized or qualified their statements, as he did on other issues (see Hall, 1987: 167 [criticizing Reiterman with Jacobs], 338 n. 13 [qualifying Mills]). Instead, when he discussed the physical child-abuse incidents that they had reported, Hall dramatically downplayed their extensiveness, their severity, and their variability. As I have indicated, therefore, his downplaying and under-representation of various abuses is my first criticism of his use of Peoples Temple and Jonestown's child-abuse incidents. By using them, however, he could putatively locate the abuses within the context of historical and contemporary Protestantism. Locating them in this manner was crucial for his argument, which was that most of the evils of Jones and Jonestown "were widespread and sometimes institutionalized practices in the wider society" (Hall, 1987: 309; see xviii; also see Hall, 1982: 49; 2000: 42; B. Moore, 1989: 551; Rigney 1988: 468). The anticult movement focused on "Temple methods, healings, money-making schemes, glorification of a prophet, intimidation and punishment, public relations, and political manipulations" (Hall, 1987: 309); but (Hall asserted) these issues were similar to what went on within society at large, and in that broad societal context did not receive scrutiny from the anticult movement.

Herein lies the second major problem with Hall's account: He minimized the extreme and damaging punishments against children by trying to equate them with the punishments that various historic and contemporary Protestants and modern Christian-related sects inflicted upon their own children. The section in which he attempted the comparison between Jonestown and Protestantism is worth quoting at length:

Physical punishment in the [Peoples] Temple certainly exceeded normative standards of the modern middle class, but Temple members were not predominantly middle class. Disciplinary practices of Peoples Temple more resembled those of stern

Protestants, from the Puritans of seventeenth century New England to some modern fundamentalist sects. The extremes of Protestant discipline are marked by a Michigan sect whose members accidentally beat a child to death for his sins in 1984. More representative of the sensibility is [the] Northeast Kingdom Community, a contemporaneous Christian religious community in Island Pond, Vermont, whose members had no apologies for using rods and switches for 'loving correction' of children, even if it left marks on their bodies.

By a Puritan standard like that of Island Pond, Temple discipline was not excessive. (Hall, 1987: 125)

Worth noting, however, about Hall's analogy between Peoples Temple and Puritan and fundamentalist Protestant punishments is that, by minimizing their severity, he replicated a criticism that he had made of the anticult movement. He had criticized that movement for ignoring issues of coercion in mainstream religion, but he downplayed the severity of the physical and emotional child abuse that brutal corporal punishment entailed in the Peoples Temple by analogizing it with Protestant child-rearing practices.

Hall was at least correct in pointing out that the beatings Jones oversaw on children bore some resemblance to ones that children suffered in various forms of fundamentalist and sectarian Protestantism (see, for example, Ellison, 1996; Ellison, Bartkowski, and Segal, 1996). For example, the groundbreaking book on Protestant punishment techniques was Philip Greven's *Spare the Child: The Religious Roots of Punishment and the Psychological Impact of Physical Abuse*, and it appeared in 1991, which was two years after Hall's Jonestown study. On the issue of beating children, Greven was unequivocal in identifying "the pervasiveness of such views about physical punishment among fundamentalist, evangelical, and Pentecostal Protestants, as well as many Americans of other persuasions, both religious and secular" (Greven 1991: 40). Among those groups, "Puritan

parents were among the most abusive in using the rod upon their children's bodies and wills" (Greven, 1991: 133). Jones's religious background included Pentecostal and Holiness theologies along with ordination in the Disciples of Christ (see Hall, 1987: 19–28), so this historical context was useful. The two contemporary (supposedly) Protestant sects, however, to which Hall drew analogies, were ones whose practices the anticult movement had specifically been concerned about for a long time and that many critics called 'cults' (see Langone and Eisenberg, 1993: 332–334). One sect turned out not even to have been Protestant, and the other was by no means representative of American Protestantism.

Child Corporal Punishment in the House of Judah

The unnamed Michigan group that Hall mentioned was the House of Judah (also known as Black Hebrew Israelite Jews)—a group whose violent activities had attracted the attention of cult-monitoring organizations of the period.¹³ Contrary, however, to Hall's claim, it was *not a Protestant group*, since its members read only the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (Helfer, 1983: 3). Moreover, the beating death of a twelve-year old child (John Yarbough) took place in July 1983 (not 1984, as Hall indicated), with his mother (Ethel Yarbrough) being convicted of involuntary manslaughter in February 1984 (*Detroit Free Press*, 1984). At the cult's religious camp, the adolescent "repeatedly refused to do his chores," which included chopping and hauling wood, digging dirt used to repair a road inside the camp and hauling pails of water" (Ray, 1983: 1A). For this refusal, adults put him in stocks and beat him "30 times on the butt" with a broomstick-sized

wooden pole. One or more blows hit his spine, which killed him (Ray, 1983: 1A). In what cult apologists likely would call an atrocity tale, John's brother, Daniel, eventually would testify under oath that his brother had been "beaten on at least 40 occasions by sect members, one of whom once tried to lift the youngster by the ears with a pair of pliers" (*Detroit News*, 1986). In response to the death, authorities removed sixty-six children from the camp, and eventually secured the conviction of the cult's leader, William Lewis, and five others to between two- and three-year federal prison terms "for conspiring to enslave sect children and causing a boy's death" (Mitzelfeld, 1986).

A pediatrics professor and medical doctor, Ray E. Helfer, assessed the children, and he observed:

...these nutritionally healthy bodies have been moderately to severely injured by repetitive beatings and other physical insults. Of the first 50 to 55 children examined by a physician after John [Yarbough]'s death a full 20% had signs of severe physical abuse. For the children greater than five years of age this percentage increases to approximately 40% and for the boys in this age range, the figure is 70% to 75%. Thus, the likelihood of a male child reaching adolescence without showing physical signs of severe abuse to his body is less than 25%, possibly even less. (Helfer, 1983: 2; see Langone and Eisenberg, 1993: 333)

The physician wrote in conclusion:

The children of the House of Judah have been reared in a manner unacceptable to any and all standards. Their bodies [are] seriously and permanently injured, their intellectual capacities underdeveloped, minimal decision making and problem solving abilities have been taught, the basic concepts of delayed gratification underdeveloped, feelings and their expressions denied, trust misguided and nongeneralizable with fear serving as the foundation of the way of lives....

¹³ Among the early accounts about the House of Judah was a news summary about the group that appeared in the newsletter of the anticult organization the Citizens Freedom Foundation (Citizens Freedom Foundation, 1983: [3]). Later, an organization that concerned itself with harm caused by cultic groups, the American Family Foundation, published an article about the House of Judah in its May/June 1988 newsletter, *The Cult Observer*, reproducing it from the newsletter of an organization (Children's Healthcare is a Legal Duty, or CHILD) dedicated to children's medical rights (American Family Foundation, 1988). In July of that year, the largest cult-monitoring organization in the United States at that time, the Cult Awareness Network, published an article about the group in its *Cult Awareness Network News* (1988).

Being reared in the House of Judah is physically unsafe and developmentally destructive. (Helfer, 1983: 10)

In essence, Hall's attempt to analogize the beating of children in Peoples Temple to the beating in the House of Judah works far better than he ever imagined, even though the group was not Protestant and the boy's deadly beating was not "for his sins" (Hall, 1987: 125). Adults beat him to death because he refused to perform slave labour, and one wonders if 'slavery' would also have been an appropriate term for the conditions in which the Peoples Temple children lived and died.

By attempting to contextualize, therefore, Peoples Temple's corporal punishment of children within fundamentalist Protestantism, Hall inadvertently showed that such behaviours occurred outside of a Christian context, and were criminal in nature. Moreover, true "atrocities" assisted a United States District Court judge to reach his decision that six key adults in leadership positions deserved federal prison time. Alas, future generations are unlikely to be able to draw these alternative conclusions about Hall's use of the House of Judah in an attempt to normalize the physical violence that occurred at Jonestown. They are unlikely to be able to do so because none of the book reviews written about *Gone from the Promised Land* (Bainbridge, 1989; Baptiste, 1988; Christiano, 1989; B. Moore, 1989; Rigney, 1988; Snow 1990; Wright 1989), nor any of the subsequent academic discussions about Jonestown that I have seen (for example, Chryssides, 1999; Dawson, 2006; Gallagher, 2004) have critiqued Hall on his child-abuse discussion. Moreover, only a few paragraphs exist on the House of Judah in two academic publications aside from this one (Landa, 1990–1991: 592 n.1; 610; Langone and Eisenberg, 1993: 333).

Child Corporal Punishment in the Northeast Kingdom Community

Although Hall had alluded to the House of Judah only when attempting to contextualize Peoples Temple's corporal punishment of children, he specifically identified by name the Northeast Kingdom Community as a better example of a group demonstrating "[t]he extremes of

Protestant discipline." To reiterate his statement about it, he described it as "a contemporaneous Christian religious community in Island Pond, Vermont, whose members had no apologies for using rods and switches for 'loving correction' of children, even if it left marks on their bodies" (Hall, 1987: 125). On this much Hall was correct, and a significant body of academic literature does exist about this group that academics in the future will be able to read about its practices. Unfortunately, key elements of that scholarship misrepresent crucial issues in the sect's stormy relationship with authorities over corporal punishment and child-protection issues.

The basic facts about a 1984 raid against the Northeast Kingdom Community are well known, and Hall cited two *New York Times* articles and one Christian magazine article about it.¹⁴ On June 22, 1984, police officers, accompanied by social workers and nurses, raided the community, removing 112 children. The next day, however, a judge overturned the raid on grounds that the search warrant was too general and did not mention specific alleged crimes against specific children who were living in specific buildings (Mahady, 1984a, 1984b). At least nine academic and academically related articles have appeared about this group and the raid against it (Bozeman and Palmer, 1997; Malcarne and Burchard, 1992; Palmer, 1998, 1999; 2001; Swantko, 2000 [then revised, updated, and reprinted in 2004], 2005–2006; Swantko and Wiseman, 1995)¹⁵; and the author/co-author of four of these is the Northeast Kingdom Community's lawyer, Jean Swantko.

In various publications, Swantko blamed the raid on the anticult movement, specifically on Priscilla Coates, who was active in the Citizens Freedom Foundation, and deprogrammer Galen

¹⁴ Hall's citation system was minimalist, citing only "NYT, 6/23, 29/84; *Charisma* 1984: 68–79. *Charisma* is a Christian magazine from the period (Nori, 1984), and a *New York Times* article did appear on June 23, 1984 (*The New York Times*, 1984). I am unable to find, however, an article from June 29; but perhaps it is a typographical error for the date of the article that appeared on June 24, 1984 (Butterfield, 1984).

¹⁵ In an editorial note in Swantko 2004: 179, she said that this article is revised, updated, and reprinted from *Social Justice Research* 12(4), 1999. My copy of the earlier article, however, is from 2000, which is the date that I use here in the bibliography.

Kelly, who had deprogrammed at least one member. According to Swantko, Coates and Kelly “prevailed on the Attorney General’s Office and the Governor himself to adopt as true” a collection of unreliable evidence that a state team of investigators had gathered from a dozen former members from around the country (Swantko, 2004: 184). Indeed, “these two antireligious zealots” (as Swantko called them [Swantko, 2004: 184]), “provided the fodder for local law enforcement to compile a 32-page affidavit used to secure the warrant, which was replete with unfounded stories of abuse strewn with erroneous and sensational interpretations of doctrine” (Swantko, 2004: 184). Nothing in Swantko’s articles, nor in any of the articles in which Susan Palmer was the author or contributor, gave any credence to the possibility that authorities acted on compelling evidence, or that Coates and Kelly were speaking in the community and talking to authorities because they had genuine, well-founded concerns about children’s welfare. Indeed, a review of media accounts¹⁶ about the Island Pond community before the raid paints a very different picture than what Swantko presented—one of serious, documented physical abuse against children, and a religious group that was uncooperative with authorities who were acting on behalf of children’s welfare.

Pre-Raid Media Accounts of Child Abuse in Island Pond’s Northeast Kingdom Community

An article that appeared in the *Hartford Courant* (and was reprinted in Florida’s *St. Petersburg Times*) at the end of 1982 provided a litany of problems that local residents were having with the Island Pond community, all the result of actions and policies of the Northeast Kingdom Community itself. These actions and policies were not things that residents learned about from

anticultists; they learned about them simply from living in the same community with members of the group (Cockerham, 1982).

Within about three years of Northeast Kingdom members moving to Island Pond in 1979 (Palmer, 2001: 213), tensions with local residents festered over a number of issues. Specifically regarding the group’s care of children, residents had figured out that the group illegally exempted its members from normal registry procedures involving births and deaths. As locals realized, “the group refuses to record births or deaths. They [*sic*] have a registered graveyard on church-owned land, although no one knows of any mortalities” (Cockerham, 1982: 6; see Harrison, 1984: 61). This refusal was particularly troublesome regarding children, since officials had no way of identifying or tracking their health and safety.

Also regarding children, townspeople saw and heard firsthand how the adults in the group punished their children. In essence, townspeople such as Bernard Henault observed them “disciplining their own children on the street” (quoted in Cockerham, 1982: 6). Almost certainly, “disciplining” often meant hitting their children. For example, former members Charles and Tommye Brown

decided to leave [the group] because they objected to the way the group treated its children. ‘The kids are punished for almost everything, asking for more food or not speaking to adults they pass on the street.’ Brown and his wife, who are childless, said the punishment ranges from whippings to being locked in their rooms for as long as a week. He also said the food is barely enough to survive on. (quoted in Cockerham, 1982: 6)

Apparently, Tommye Brown had testified about the beatings during a previous, high-profile custody case, since, in late November 1982, *Newsweek* reported that, during the trial,

witnesses testified that all of the Kingdom’s children, from tots to teens, received frequent and lengthy bare-bottom thrashings with wooden rods—

¹⁶ In one of her articles about the Northeast Kingdom Community, Susan Palmer referred to “negative and inaccurate media reports” that likely contributed to the “violent reactions” against the group (Palmer, 2001: 211). Presumably, she had in mind the very media accounts to which I am about to refer. What suggests to me, however, that these media accounts likely were accurate is that multiple reporters using different sources (interviews with former members, police reports, medical reports, photographs, etc.) identified similar accounts of severe child beatings allegedly perpetrated by different people

during which they were supposed to smile and thank their elders.... 'I couldn't stand what they were doing to their children,' said Tommye. 'I couldn't stand listening to them cry.' (Zabarsky, 1982)¹⁷

Again, these tensions between the local community and the Northeast Kingdom came from interactions that members from each group had with one another while living and working in proximity. Coates and Kelly from the Citizens Freedom Foundation did not have to generate allegations of physical abuse against Northeast Kingdom Community children—Island Pond residents apparently saw instances with their own eyes, heard the beatings going on in a Northeast Kingdom community house (Sexton 1983: 25), and read about other instances in the local press.

In addition to information about children allegedly being beaten within the Northeast Community, local citizens also learned from the press that Lydia Mattatall, one of a defector's children, essentially had been kidnapped. Ex-

¹⁷ Alluding to this trial, Swantko and Wiseman said that, in 1982, a member of their community, "whose wife accused him of pedophilia," defected and tried to gain custody of the family's five children. Vowing to "'destroy' the community, [he] sought advice from anticult activists, who apparently suggested that he spread lies in the media and among local government officials" (Swantko and Wiseman, 1995: 88). What they failed to state is that, during the hearing,

...several former members of the Vermont church community testified that toddlers were beaten with rods or belts. David Anderson, 24, said he comforted one mother as a church member whipped her 3-year-old son on his legs, chest and arms for about 40 minutes. He said he also saw two other youngsters the same age beaten until blood flowed down their legs. (United Press International, 1982)

Simply from reading the account by Swantko and Wiseman, one cannot know that several people testified under oath about intense corporal punishment in the group. Bozeman and Palmer 1997: 184) indicate that, in the early 1980s,

[r]umors, gossip and mis-information about the community—particularly about possible child abuse—grew, a situation unintentionally aggravated by the Church's unwillingness to indulge the curiosity of journalists or state officials. This was particularly true after 1982, when church members lost a series of child custody battles due to their unconventional lifestyle....

Note that both reporters' and state officials' interest in the group was only "curiosity," and that "possible child abuse" was only "mis-information."

members relayed that the defector's former wife "gave" her to [leader Elbert Eugene] Spriggs as a faith gesture" (Nickerson, 1983: 81), and Spriggs took her to Europe. In her scholarship, Susan Palmer mentioned Lydia was with Spriggs; Swantko did not. Palmer indicated that "members claim that [mother] Cindy Mattatall gained her husband's consent prior to this arrangement [involving Lydia living with Spriggs], but when he was disciplined by the community in Boston, he decided to claim his daughter was 'kidnapped'" (Palmer, 1999: 170). Even if this were true, however, when the father, Juan, demanded custody of his daughter, "the church has ignored a court order to return her," and (on December 28, 1982) members "were told to pray for his death. One elder of the sect rose during a 'body meeting' of baptized members and described a dream in which Juan's throat was slit and his head lopped off" (Nickerson, 1983: 81; see Braithwaite, 1983: 1). Moreover, no reasonable explanation comes to mind about why the group leader would want to raise someone else's young daughter in the first place, especially thousands of miles from the parents themselves. No indication exists, for example, in anything that I have read, that the mother gave her daughter to Spriggs out of fear that her husband was a child molester, as might be inferred from Swantko's comments and subsequent evidence about the father himself.

Lydia's disappearance was not the first time that a young girl had gone missing from the Northeast Kingdom Community at Island Pond. In 1980, a Northeast Kingdom member kidnapped his daughter, Gabrielle Spring Howell, from her grandmother's house in Tennessee and brought her to Island Pond. Gabrielle Spring's mother found her and was trying to flee with her when Northeast Kingdom members (or her husband himself—accounts vary) "ran her off the road and snatched the child again." Her father took her to Europe; but three years later (when she was seven years old), her uncle tracked her down in Spain and returned her to her mother in Alabama, in March 1983. Spring (which was the name she went by) "told her family on her return that she was beaten, forced to do physical labor, milk goats and scavenge for nuts and berries to feed the

cult" (*Ottawa Citizen*, 1983; see Daley, 1985: 154–155). Moreover, upon her return, she bore

scars on her legs and buttocks that her mother, once a member of the church, claims are the result of whippings administered by sect members. 'These are sick and dangerous people who would do this to a child in the name of Jesus,' the mother, Deborah Heflin 26, said in a telephone interview.... (Nickerson, 1983: 87)

A medical doctor in Alabama examined Spring, and he reported that "she had 'multiple, long; narrow, discolored scar tissue areas over the ... buttocks and posterior thighs—the result of severe blows to this area with a rod-like instrument'" (quoted in Daley, 1985: 155).

It turned out, too, that Spring had babysat Juan Mattatall's daughter, Lydia, in Europe. The information that she brought back, however, was deeply disturbing. Detective Corporal Peter M. Johnson filed a report about his interview with Spring, indicating that she told him,

During the time in Spain, Spring was severely disciplined by Kirsten Nelson and Gene and Marsha Spriggs. Spring Howell advised that she was hit all over with a stick with her clothes off. During the interview, Spring showed concern for children that [*sic*] were still with the group; Spring named Lydia (Lydia Mattatall), Semony Daniel and Benjamin Sayer that [*sic*] they were still getting beaten; Spring advised that during breakfast, if she asked for more food, she would get a beating. Spring was suppose[d] to take care of Lydia Mattatall and advised that Lydia was still in diapers; Spring got a spanking for lying about Lydia wetting the bed. (Johnson 1983a: 1)

Shifting to information that the police officer received from Spring's mother, his report continued:

Deborah Heflin advised that at one point, approximately 3½ years ago, she was forced to watch as Gene Spriggs and James Brooks hit Spring with a stick

until she bled; Deborah advised that Spring was scarred up when she came home from Spain and that a few weeks after she returned, photographs were taken; Deborah gave this officer written permission to obtain the photographs.... (Johnson, 1983a: 2)

It appeared, therefore, that the founder and leader of the Northeast Kingdom Community was practicing corporal punishment against children, not to mention requiring a child to care for an infant. About a month after officer Johnson filed this report, and in a surprise twist of fortune, Mattatall recovered his daughter, in October 1983, when Canadians living on Cape Sable Island, Nova Scotia who had seen a television show about the group recognized Spriggs and phoned both the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and Canadian Broadcasting Corporation television (Gorham, 1983).¹⁸

Information provided by defector Arthur Fritog (apparently in January 1983)¹⁹ established the connection between the alleged beating behavior by the leader and his wife in Spain and the probable beating practices in Island Pond, Vermont. Fritog departed the group after having attended the meeting where two elders asked baptized community members to pray for Juan Mattatall's death. As a Vietnam War veteran told a friend at the time, however, "'I've watched a lot of men die, and I've been party to a lot of men dying.... I assured him that nobody knew what death was. I could not ask for a man to die,'" so he left the meeting and departed

¹⁸ Palmer, (1999: 162) mistakenly gives the year as 1982 when Mattatall retrieved his daughter, but it was 1983.

¹⁹ As sometimes happens when one tries to piece together events by using documents, I have encountered some problems around events and dates concerning Arthur Fritog that I cannot resolve. The newspaper article indicating that Fritog had left the Northeast Kingdom Community has a handwritten date on it of "January 12, 1983" (Braithwaite, 1983). I also have, however, an affidavit by Detective Corporal Peter M. Johnson, dated July 18, 1983, alleging that that a person named Timothy Pendergrass had committed "simple assault" against Fritog's son by "hitting hit with a piece of 2 x 4 on the buttocks" as a punishment for laughing with two other boys (Johnson, 1983c). Does this report mean that Fritog remained in Island Pond after he left the group? Did he rejoin it after issuing his harsh criticisms against the media? Is the handwritten date incorrect on the newspaper photocopy that I have? The fact that detective Johnson reached Arthur Fritog by telephone suggests that he no longer was a part of the Northeast Kingdom Community; but if that is so, then why did Pendergrass allegedly beat his son? I cannot resolve these issues.

from the group (quoted in Braithwaite, 1983: 1). In Fritog's accounts about what life was in the Northeast Kingdom Community, he revealed:

Methods of child discipline at the Island Pond community have been dictated in a series of messages from Mr. Spriggs and his wife, based on their experiences with three-year-old Lydia.

One method, called scourging, involved tying a nude child face down on a bed and striking the entire body with a thin wooden balloon stick. Mr. Fritog said he had seen the technique used on a two-year-old girl. (Braithwaite, 1983: 23)

If true, then Fritog's information established a clear link between the beatings that Spring received in Spain—the results of which police had summarized in a police report and had seen in photographs—and messages received and followed by Northeast Kingdom residents from the leader and his wife in Europe, both of whom had been involved with beating the young girl.

What at the time appeared to be unfortunate confirmation that Northeast Community elders were following the Spriggs's instructions about scourging came when Constance and Roland Church reported that elder Charles "Eddie" Wiseman had scourged their thirteen-year-old daughter, Darlynn, over a period of seven hours. Detective Johnson's report indicated that he and a person from Social and Rehabilitation Services taped a statement from Darlynn in which she

Advised that she was sent from the room and the adults stayed and had a meeting. Darlynn was called back into the room and told she was going to be disciplined for lying. Darlynn was stripped to her underpants and told to put her hands on a window sill. The accused then hit the victim with a long, thin piece of wood (balloon stick). According to Darlynn she was hit and then questioned.... The victim advised that this lasted from approximately 0930 until 1630 hours. (Johnson, 1983b: 2)

Along with the police report, Detective Johnson also submitted a copy of a medical report written by a physician at a local hospital, which

"indicated that linear scars were present on legs and would be consistent with the victim's statement" (Johnson, 1983b: 2).

Darlynn's father, Roland Church, who was present in the room during the beating, confirmed his daughter's story. He indicated that the men who beat her "suggested that the rod be an extra long one and that they should strip her down to her waist, down to her panties" (R. Church, 1983: 3). He also indicated that the men talked to her for about "an hour before the discipline started," and it lasted "until 4:30 in the afternoon." The men overseeing her beating would stop scourging her for "ten to fifteen minutes until they pried information out of her," then start the whipping again (R. Church, 1983: 3). Likewise, Darlynn's mother, Constance Church, confirmed her daughter's story, since she, too, witnessed it. The man beating her daughter, she said, used long balloon sticks as the whips (C. Church, 1983: 5). Although crucial aspects of this family's accounts would change in the future, before the raid there was strong evidence that adults were scourging children, as the Spriggs couple had instructed.²⁰

More dramatic evidence of physical abuse came forward in late August 1983, when Brenda Hebert, who was the wife of a Northeast Kingdom Community member, produced for the police seven photographs she had taken of children whom she said had been injured, sometimes bleeding, from beatings. One picture was of a baby's bottom—the child was still in diapers; Hebert claimed the child had been beaten for a week (Hebert, 1983: 4–5). Still another allegation of a nine-month-old being physically abused came to light in March 1984, when defector Jeff Jenke indicated that, in the community, a baby with broken bones had been hit with "sticks," and the people in the church

²⁰ Worth noting are Susan Palmer's comments on the child beating issue:

I have been asked on many occasions to express an opinion concerning the severity of these disciplines. I always state that, since I have never personally witnessed the chastisement of children, I cannot judge. Certainly, the people I have spent time with strike me as kind and loving parents, and their children are high-spirited and trusting, so it is difficult to believe some of the affidavits I have read for the courts. (Palmer, 1999: 161)

said that the breaks were from rickets (Jenke, 1984: 5–6; see Hebert, 1983: 3).

Clearly, Social and Rehabilitative Services knew that a serious problem existed regarding the physical abuse of children in Island Pond's Northeast Kingdom Community. Authorities had similar accounts of beatings coming from multiple sources over a period of years. They also had medical reports that corroborated people's statements, and they even had photographs showing the damage caused by children having been beaten with balloon sticks. Moreover, police and social services had no way of knowing whether any children had been sufficiently injured to have required medical attention, since one member of the Northeast Kingdom Community already had been convicted of practicing medicine without a license (Lium, 1982; O'Dea, 1984). Likewise, officials could not even be sure that no children had died from the physical abuse, since the Community operated its own graveyard, refused to register births and deaths, and at every juncture refused to cooperate with them. The lack of cooperation had gone so far as a Community member hiding a stillborn baby's body from authorities in 1980 (Kenney, 1980).

With these facts in mind, a raid against the Northeast Kingdom Community was inevitable. Any efforts by subsequent authors such as Jean Swantko to blame it on "anticultists who try to use the legal system" (Swantko, 2000: 342), or Susan Palmer, who saw the raid as a consequences of anticultists who "created a portrait of a nefarious cult habitually cruel to children" (Palmer, 1998: 201) clearly are attempts to scapegoat responsibility away from the group itself. After Judge Mahady threw out the warrant and any possible evidence that authorities acquired, the Commissioner of Social and Rehabilitation Services for the Vermont Agency of Human Services, John D. Burchard, Ph.D., wrote a clear (and to my mind, compelling) justification for the raid and the continued need to provide protection to Northeast Kingdom Community's children. Swantko called this statement a "self-serving justification" (Swantko, 2000: 353), but it actually seems to have been an accurate account

of the decision-making processes that led up to the raid itself.

With considerable understatement, Burchard let readers see how surprising it was that Judge Mahady would have squashed the state's intervention into the Community on behalf of its children, since he himself had commented strongly on the group's corporal punishment in a previous case. In that case, Mahady stated:

'At all material times, while the children have been residing at the religious community, they have been subjected to frequent and methodical physical abuse by adult members of the community in the form of hours-long whippings with balloon sticks. These beatings result from minor disciplinary infractions.'
(quoted in Burchard, 1984: 6)

Although Burchard said little else directly about Mahady's decision, the clear implication was that, in ruling to dismiss the raid, the judge allowed a social environment to continue that even he realized fostered physical abuse.

Swantko claimed that "antireligious zealots, Kelly and Coates, prevailed on the Attorney General's Office and the Governor himself to adopt as true the unreliable information collected by two state employees sent to investigate" former members around the United States (Swantko, 2000: 347). Burchard, however, pointed out that many of the incidents that contributed to officials believing in the necessity of the raid had appeared in the media,²¹ and much of the evidence also included

²¹ Swantko also had an issue with Burchard's use of media accounts:

While Vermont's Commissioner of Social Services claimed evidence of abuse of children, he relied on newspaper reports unlawfully published as a source. Despite the fact that he knew, or should have known, the confidentiality laws for juvenile cases, he violated them. He then used the fact that newspaper reporters printed unlawful disclosures to justify his own use of them, clearly prohibited by the juvenile statutes. (Swantko 2005-2006: 45)

While I do not know what these laws were in the early 1980s, perhaps they had to do with not using the names of children who allegedly had been abused. If this interpretation were in fact accurate, then I note that both Swantko herself and Palmer named thirteen-year-old Dealynn Church as having alleged that a group leader had spanked her (Palmer, 1998: 199; Swantko 2000: 349). Perhaps reporters were able to use children's names because their

"sworn statements from witnesses and victims and there are photographs corroborating several of these incidents" (Burchard, 1984: 5). Religiously bigoted information from "anticult zealots" played no role in the officials' decision, especially since many of the incidents, and much of the supporting evidence were local to the Island Pond area.

Without specifically naming the cases involved, Burchard presented "some of the specific allegations" that gave police and social-service workers great alarm about the safety of the Community's children:

1. A named four-year-old child who was hit fifteen to twenty times with a rod for imagining that a block of wood was a truck.
2. A named seven-year-old girl who was stripped naked by several persons besides her father and spanked for asking for some food. The spanking continued until her bottom bled.
3. A named thirteen-month-old female child spanked for not taking food from someone other than her parents. The spanking led to bruises on both legs and her buttocks.
4. A named three-and-one-half-year-old boy disciplined until his back was bleeding.
5. A named thirteen-year-old girl who was stripped to her underpants by several men and hit with a rod for being deceitful. The discipline lasted over a period of several hours and produced more than eighty welts on her body.
6. A named eleven-year-old boy who was hit with a 2 x 4 eight times for laughing at a church member. A large blister and bruise resulted from the discipline. (Burchard, 1984: 5)

Burchard certainly captured the feelings of many Island Pond citizens when he offered, "any person who reads the published accounts of the

disciplinary practices of the church must believe there is reasonable evidence that child abuse may have occurred" (Burchard, 1984: 5; see Malcarne and Burchard, 1992). He also was aware of how severe (if not deadly) child beatings in closed communities can be, because he had consulted with Michigan officials concerning what had transpired within the House of Judah (*News Tribune*, 1984).

Judge Mahady's objections to the raid, of course, were not because he doubted the probability that adults were inflicting child physical abuse upon children; rather, they were largely because the warrant was not specific in naming alleged victims and their exact locations. Burchard, therefore, both examined whether the state had any alternative to initiating a raid on an entire community, and discussed whether such a raid was legal from the standpoint of an action designed for juvenile protection. On the question of possible alternatives, Burchard was very clear that the behavior of Northeast Kingdom Community members toward authorities left his department with no other choice than to issue a general warrant. Said succinctly, time and again, Community members refused to cooperate with far less intrusive social-service interventions:

The problem that State has faced from the beginning is that the church community appears to be purposefully organized to shield the identity of the parents and children in question, and to allow them to thwart the ordinary steps of due process which many critics seem convinced should have worked successfully. (Burchard, 1984: 7)

Amidst discussing eleven instances (dating back only to 1982) when the Northeast Kingdom Community had refused to cooperate with a variety of state agencies, Burchard concluded "that the church does not recognize the state as having any authority to examine any of their children under any circumstances" (Burchard, 1984: 10; see 8-10; see Palmer, 1998: 194). Later he added, "the active, unlawful resistance of the church was also extraordinary" (Burchard, 1984: 13). The noncooperation and actual resistance of the Community members, individually and collectively, made it impossible

alleged beatings became public knowledge outside of court proceedings.

for the Attorney General's office or Social and Rehabilitation Services to specify the names or specific locations of people or possible evidence. The group members "file [tax] returns as if they were one family" (Harrison, 1984: 61), and they acted as a unified front against all of the state's authorities and institutions designed to protect children.

Comparing the detailed media and professional accounts of child physical abuse within the Northeast Kingdom Community with the scholarship on the group, it is clear that most scholars have buried or dismissed the former Commissioner's thoughtful statement about his perspective on the raid that his office had conducted. If researchers, therefore, try to contextualize the child punishment in Peoples Temple and Jonestown by following Hall's suggestion and looking at the Northeast Kingdom, then they likely will find articles by Swantko, Palmer, and a few others that conveniently neglect to portray the severity with which that group apparently disciplined children and teens. Hall greatly understated the severity of the group's abuse when he stated that members' use of "rods and switches" sometimes "left marks on [children's] bodies" (Hall, 1987: 125), since in reality the beatings apparently also left bloodied and bruised children with scars.

This level of corporal punishment clearly exceeded community standards outside the narrow confines of some Protestant (mostly fundamentalist and evangelical) circles, which Hall overlooked when he used the group's corporal punishment actions as indicative of a "Puritan standard" that was not excessive (Hall, 1987: 125). These actions were excessive and potentially harmful to the children themselves, as historian Philip Greven realized. In *Spare the Child* (1991), Greven highlighted many of the beating allegations, and mentioned the raid as "the result of several years of intense but frustrating investigation by the Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services" (Greven 1991: 35). When discussing the harms caused by such beatings, Greven identified the causal connection between corporal punishment techniques involving "spankings, whippings and beatings" of children and the development of

sadomasochism in adults (Greven, 1991: 174–186). "For many adults," Greven observed,

...sadomasochism in both erotic and nonerotic forms is a direct consequence of the confusions generated by the combination of love and pain in childhood, the long-term outcome of the normal assaults and abuse associated with physical punishment from infancy to adolescence. (Greven, 1991: 174)

Illustrating this point, Greven concluded,

...the association of love, fear, and pain begin early and remain embedded in the unconscious mind for life. Children from Island Pond, Vermont, who have been beaten for disobedience, have sometimes insisted that painful punishment is the proof of love. (Greven, 1991: 175)

He quoted a disaffected member who told a reporter, "I have an eight-year-old girl who is a masochist. She equates love with beatings" (Greven, 1991: 175, quoting Juan Mattatall in Sexton, 1983: 36). The ex-member had audio-taped that daughter insisting to him:

'I know, the Lord wants you to spank us [herself and her younger sister] if we're disobedient. If you love us ... then you'll spank us. If you spank us, then you love us. If you don't spank us, then you don't love us.... That's what it says in the Bible.' (Greven, 1991:175, quoting daughter of Juan Mattatall in Sexton, 1983: 36)²²

Greven concluded his section on the implications of Northeast Kingdom Community disciplinary procedures by observing that "the association of love and pain is inescapable when corporal punishments are used" (Greven 1991, 176). It seems wholly inappropriate, therefore, to continue Hall's use of fundamentalist and evangelical Protestantism to normalize the

²² In one of many ironies involving the people and incidents surrounding the Island Pond raid, the ex-member father Juan Mattatall, who taped his daughter making these statements, would be murdered several years later by his own mother (who then killed herself), apparently because she feared that her son would have ongoing problems around his pedophilia (Palmer, 1998: 196).

corporal punishment at Jonestown. Such intense beatings are physically and emotionally harmful to children regardless of the religious or secular context in which they occur.

Moving beyond Hall's analogy involving corporal punishment in Jonestown and conservative Protestantism, other forms of extraordinary discipline took place under Jones's supervision that have no Protestant parallels. Hall had to downplay or ignore these other forms in order for his analogy to Protestantism to appear superficially credible. I am not aware of Protestant children being lowered into wells and terrified by adults hiding within them or within surrounding bushes, and I am not aware of Protestant children being forced to eat their own vomit. I have not seen any reports of Protestant children being punished by ingesting hot peppers or having those peppers rubbed on their rectums. Nor have I encountered examples of Protestant children being placed in leg shackles and having their heads shaved. Hall's effort, therefore, simply failed when he attempted to 'normalize' the child physical abuse inflicted by Jones and his followers by equating it to practices in conservative Protestantism. Rather, the attempted analogy heightened awareness of how uniquely brutal the Jonestown environment was on children. The brutality reached its apex, of course, with the child murders.

The Child Murders

To his credit, Hall included information about the child murders that took place as adults administered the poison to infants and children (Hall, 1987: 283–287). He reproduced some of the debate between member Christine Miller and Jones in the minutes before the final act, in which she told Jones, “I look at all the babies and I think they deserve to live” (Christine Miller in Hall, 1987: 283; see Hall, 2000: 37; and for a transcription of these final exchanges between Miller, Jones, and others, see Maaga, 1998: 147–164). Concerning a retort that Jones gave soon afterward to another member's question about how Jones could allow his precious little boy (John Victor, who was the subject of an ongoing paternity battle [see Hall, 1982: 48–49]) to die, Hall reported Jones as

saying that he could not put the child's life above the lives of the others. Hall surmised that, “for the children, Jones held, life was worse than death: ‘we give them [i.e., the governmental authorities] our children, then our children will suffer forever’” (Jones in Hall, 1987: 284; see also Jones quoted in Smith, 1982: 117). He described the actions of the first two adults to pour poison down the throats of their children, and he reproduced the comments of a Jonestown member who instructed, “the older children help love the little children and reassure them. They're not crying from any pain; it's just a little bitter tasting” (Judy James, quoted in Hall, 1987: 285; see Hall, 2000: 37). When yet another man tried to speak to the crowd, “the shrieks of the children yelling ‘Noooo!’ swallowed up his words” (Hall, 1987: 285). As Hall concluded in an early book chapter on Jonestown, “many Jonestown residents did not willingly commit the suicide” (Hall, 1982: 54).

Despite Jones's pronouncement that the cyanide would not cause convulsions, Hall mentioned the action of Odell Rhoades, who “helped carry a young boy out to the yard and gently laid down the life jerking with convulsions” (Hall, 1987: 286; see a longer account in Feinsod, 1981: 198). Curiously, however, Hall did not provide the exact number of children—around 276—who fell victim to the poisonings at Jonestown, even though one of his sources was Kenneth Wooden's *The Children of Jonestown*, which provided this number in the first sentence of its prologue (Wooden, 1981: 1; cf. Smith, 1982: 108, and Chidester, 2003: 154, both of whom gave the number of infants and children at 260). Most of the 234 unidentified bodies were the murdered children (R. Moore, 1988: 107, 109). Not always included in the body count were Sharon Amos and her three children, who were away from Jonestown at the time of the murder/suicides. After receiving instructions over the short-wave radio to follow the lead provided by her comrades, she slit the throats of her children, and then cut her own wrists (Feinsod, 1981: 210; see B. Moore, 1989: 183).

The most detailed examination of the dead people's ages appeared in a 2004 study by Rebecca Moore, who lost two sisters and a nephew (i.e., a sister's child) among the 918 or

so people who died because of Jonestown (R. Moore, 2004: 61). She determined that “one hundred thirty-one (131) were children under the age of 10; 234 were between the ages of 10 and 19...,” which means that “more than one-third were under 20” (R. Moore, 2004: 64–65). (Presumably, Moore included nineteen-year-olds so that her findings would encompass all teenagers, but the exclusion of eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds would have allowed her to speak more clearly about the number of children who died.)²³ In addition, “two hundred eleven (211) people were 60 and older, with three-fourths of this segment being black females” (R. Moore, 2004: 65). From these figures, “twenty percent of the members were over 60 years of age.... Over a third of the population—36 percent—were infants, children, and teenagers” (Sawyer, 2004: 169–170). (Moore’s bar graph that presents ages makes it difficult to be precise, but apparently around ninety people who died at Jonestown were in their seventies and around twenty-five were in their eighties. One or two people appear to have been in their nineties [R. Moore, 2004: 66]. In sum, half or more of the people who died at or related to Jonestown were of ages (young and old) at which responsible adults should have been giving them varying degrees of care. Instead, the presumed caregivers killed them.

The inescapable reality that adults (often parents) murdered hundreds of children in the final moments of Jonestown has caused problems for scholars who wish to give interpretations of Jonestown that challenge anticult images of Jones as the brainwasher who destroyed the critical minds of his followers. Respected religious-studies professor Catherine Wessinger, for example, wrote the introduction to Mary McCormick Maaga’s study that attempted “to restore the humanity of the individuals who were a part of People’s Temple” (Maaga, 1998: xx). (The book’s front cover contains four pictures, each with a child or children and an adult in normal, almost always

happy, poses.) Toward this goal, Wessinger offered:

Most Jonestown residents agreed that their ultimate concern was worth killing and dying for. The transcript of the last Jonestown meeting [reproduced as an appendix in Maaga’s book] provides evidence of peer pressure, persuasion, psychological coercion—by the whole group, not solely by Jim Jones—but there is no evidence that physical force was used to make people commit suicide. (Wessinger in Maaga, 1998: xi–xii)

Immediately, however, Wessinger seemingly contradicts herself in a qualifying footnote:

I am saying that, contrary to the media myth, we have no *evidence* that there was any physical coercion to join the mass suicide. The witnesses are dead. There is testimony of surviving witnesses of people willingly going to participate in the mass suicide. Certainly the children did not choose to die. Probably a number of elderly people did not have a choice. Dissidents in Jonestown were drugged and kept confined. These people do not choose to die. Able-bodied people could have escaped the suicide easily and some chose to do so. My primary point here is that mass suicide could not have been carried out without the agency of the able-bodied adults. (Wessinger in Maaga, 1998: xii n. [*italics in original*])

In other words (and not even challenging her claim that able-bodied members easily could have escaped rifle-carrying guards [see Chidester, 2003: 154]), *at the very least* the group used physical coercion probably to kill dissidents and the elderly and certainly to murder the children.

In essence, the children of Jonestown suffered what surely has to be the cruelest and most severe form of child abuse—murder, committed by their poisoning parents. A surviving letter from Jonestown member Annie Moore (deceased sister of Jonestown scholar Rebecca

²³ Here I follow Article 1 of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which defines “a child” as “every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the laws applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier” (United Nations, 1989: Article 1).

Moore) likely captured the attitudes that many of the able-bodied killers felt about murdering the children. Annie Moore indicated,

'I don't relish the idea of participating in killing the children and I don't think anyone else does but I will do it because I think I could be as compassionate as the next person about it and I don't hate children.' (letter reproduced in Maaga, 1998: 123)

Efforts to restore the humanity of the individuals who were at Jonestown, therefore, cannot gloss over the fact that roughly half of those people had their humanity—their very lives—taken from them by other members acting under Jones's directives.

Somewhat similar qualifications about the fate of the children appeared in David Chidester's 1988 study (revised 2003), *Salvation and Suicide*, which attempted to give a religious-studies perspective to the tragic events. "For those who willingly embraced death through revolutionary suicide, Jones described the conditions under which this could be regarded as a meaningful act within the categories of symbolic orientation and classification that operated in their shared worldview" (Chidester, 2003: 155; see Smith, 1982: 119–120). But in the previous paragraph he had to acknowledge:

Finally, it would be difficult to suppose that the 260 children²⁴ of Jonestown all committed suicide. Babies were sacrificed first, perhaps to signify to the adults that this was not a rehearsal, not another loyalty test, but an act from which there could be no turning back once it had begun. (Chidester, 2003: 154–155)

However much scholars within religious studies want to find meaning for the suicides within the group's own theological system, for the children the final event was infanticide. As even Hall admitted, "the organizational effectiveness of People's [*sic*] Temple for more than fifteen years and the actual carrying out of the mass

murder/suicide show that Jones and his staff knew what they were doing" (Hall 1982: 36; Hall, 1990: 270).

Conclusion

The so-called 'cult wars' continue to rage, as a few scholars persist in publishing ideologically tainted studies designed to minimize or ignore real instances of harm. In such studies, of course, these scholars have to neutralize or deemphasize the child abuse that the adults far too frequently perpetrate upon children. Sociologically, therefore, important social processes involving the socialization of adults into abusers (not to mention, murderers) are crucial to identify; and studies that ignore, sidestep, or downplay the range of child abuses that adults perpetrated against children in Jonestown are overlooking an important issue. It seems likely that they are doing so because close analysis of groups' deviant socialization processes will fuel anticultist criticism of numerous groups. As a sociologist realized back in 1983,

The children of Jonestown were very thoroughly socialized. For them, the [Peoples] Temple was not an alternative reality, a subuniverse, but the ground of their primary socialization.... The primary socialization that the children of the Temple was receiving, however, was taking place within a milieu designed more for the secondary socialization of their parents—a milieu oriented toward those who might be tempted to deny its reality. (Weightman, 1983: 152–153)

Surely these questions about socialization are vital (see R. Moore, 1988: 130–131), especially concerning how adults came to individual and collective positions that allowed them to abuse and ultimately murder children.

Far too much of the existing scholarship on Jonestown has avoided detailed examinations of the child abuse in Peoples Temple facilities, probably for fear that such an examination would feed the fires of the anticult movement with atrocity tales (Maaga, 1998: 39; see Hall, 1987: 107; R. Moore, 2009: 5, 116–118; Shupe and Bromley, 1982: 128–129; Swantko, 2004:

²⁴ See above, where I give Kenneth Wooden's (1981: 1) number for dead children as 276.

180–181; Weightman, 1983: 177–178). If, however, members of the anticult movement are in fact looking at issues related to child abuse in Jonestown and other ideological organizations, then they are pursuing an important, and often neglected, research and social agenda. At this moment, however, no comprehensive academic study of the child abuse within Peoples Temple and Jonestown exists for future generations to read. In a discussion a decade ago about why scholars were not ready to ‘close the canon’ concerning Jonestown, nowhere in lists of issues and data still needing study were the plights of children (and for that matter, the elderly) mentioned (R. Moore, 2000: 17, 22). Surely their lives and their deaths demand careful and thoughtful attention.

As I conclude this article, I return a final time to one of the groups, the Northeast Kingdom Community, that Hall used when he attempted to normalize the physical beatings that Peoples Temple and Jonestown children suffered. An important glimpse into the “subuniverse” of that group—one that casts additional doubt upon its validity in providing normative child-rearing practices, comes from a surprising source—a child-turned-young-adult who had intimate knowledge of the world in which spokesperson, lawyer, and scholar Jean Swantko lived.

Swantko not only is the group’s lawyer, but also is a convert who (in 1991) married a leader, Charles “Eddie” Wiseman. She had met Wiseman when she was a Vermont public defender assigned to defend him on charges of simple assault, after he allegedly was involved in the beating of a 13-year-old girl (a case that I mentioned earlier [Johnson, 1995: 24]). This beating/whipping allegedly took place over a seven-hour interval, and the girl and her father “told state officials [that] she had 89 welts” from it (Clendinen, 1984).²⁵ A court dropped the charges, however, in 1985 because the defendant had not received a “speedy trial” (Swantko, 2004: 185), but the state’s case had been

damaged badly when the father of the girl retracted his initial statements about the beating (Donnelly, 1984).

Years later, Swantko went so far as to indicate that “Members do use corporal punishment, but abusive punishment is not taught or condoned” (Swantko, 2004: 185). Certainly she was in a position within the group to know about this corporal punishment, since she became a stepmother to Wiseman’s children, one of whom was Zebulun (or simply Zeb) Wiseman. In 2001, Zeb fled the group and spoke to a reporter. “Growing up in there, I saw the inside scoop. There’s [sic] a lot of things there that weren’t right.... Spanking kids, locking them up” (quoted in Wedge, 2001). Academics are likely to believe Swantko, who dismissed allegations of abuse, but her own stepson, and others of his generation, have a different tale to tell. Academics who ignore their voices run the risk of producing scholarship that, in the future, will prove to be simply, demonstrably, wrong.

Jonestown was a dramatic reminder for people worldwide that demagogic, emotionally and psychologically imbalanced (see Lys, 2005), but charismatic individuals can both attract followers and do tremendous harm to them and their children. Their deaths were the clearest possible warning that unaccountable leaders can spiral downward with their flocks into destructive, even murderous behavior. The clarity of this warning to future generations must include accurate accounts of what the youth experienced, and it is highly regrettable that people in generations to come will receive information that downplays the Jonestown children’s suffering. It is equally regrettable that similar diminishments of child abuse appear in accounts about young lives in other groups. Academics who write apologetic or misleading accounts of life in sectarian or ideological groups do an injustice to the lives of the people about whom they write and a disservice to their readers in the years and decades to come. Victimized children deserve more; and so, too, do the persons who were (and are) active in anticult groups and who try to sound the alarm about children’s plights.

²⁵ Palmer (1998: 207 n.2) claimed, “the testimony of ‘eight or nine’ welts on her skin, read out by the judge with a heavy Maine accent, was transcribed as ‘eighty-nine’ welts.” I cannot verify or disconfirm the claim.

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