**Heaven and Hell on Earth**

**An Analysis of the events in Jonestown and Savonarola’s Reign in Florence**

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In the 1970s, the United States experienced one of the most tragic events in recent history as a result of religious fervor gone awry. The Peoples Temple, located at Jonestown in the jungles of Guyana, was a new religious order established by Jim Jones that included members from every racial, educational, and financial background. It was a group that preached equality. As the colony grew, so did Jim Jones’ power. Eventually, Jim Jones succumbed to the effects of drugs and alcohol, becoming both figuratively and literally drunk with power. His madness led to a call for a mass suicide by his followers. Over 900 deaths resulted from his order to his devoted followers. In Florence during the fifteenth century, similar events took place under the religious influence of Girolamo Savonarola, a monk from Ferrara. Like Jim Jones, Savonarola used religious fervor to create a cult among the citizens of Florence, which resulted in many brutal tortures and deaths. By examining the detailed record of events that occurred in Jonestown thirty years ago, it is easier to understand the events that occurred under Savonarola’s direction in Renaissance Florence due to similarities between Jim Jones and Savonarola’s rises to power, the group mentality in the formation of a cult, and the events that led to each group’s ultimate downfall.

Jim Jones was born in Indiana, and, even early in his life, was particularly interested both in religion and death. He was well educated, graduating from Indiana University and having a particular interest in the strengths and weaknesses of Hitler, Stalin, Marx, and Gandhi. Girolamo Savonarola was also well educated, coming from a well-to-do family in Ferrara with a grandfather who was a well-known physician. Instead of following in his family’s footsteps, however, Savonarola became increasingly obsessed with religion, believing that the world was filled with sin that needed to be eradicated. Since Savonarola was a learned man, he knew how to use words to spread his message that sin had to be repented. This is similar to Jones because he was also very charismatic, using his sermons as a way to draw crowds of people from all over the country. The sermons of both Jim Jones and Girolamo Savonarola were also similar in that the two were prophetic in their teachings, claiming that they were able to speak and be connected to God. For instance, in the documentary Jones was seen performing “miracles”, such as giving a person with glasses perfect sight and an old women who had not walked for years the ability to run again. Later, however, it was revealed that these miracles were frauds as part of a staged act to impress his viewers. While it is not known whether or not Savonarola performed miracles, he did prophesize Florence’s destruction. It was just fortuitous circumstance that economic and political turmoil occurred during his rise to power.

In addition, by examining Jim Jones’ expressed goals in creating the Peoples Temple, parallels can be drawn to Savonarola’s expressed goals in his preaching in Florence. For example, both religious leaders preached equality. In the case of Jones, he desired to create a religion based on the person, not the race, since he was very against racism. As a result, he created a community of people of all different ethnic, geographical, and economic backgrounds during a time when there was still tension between races. Similarly, Savonarola, while mainly focusing on the redemption of Florentine citizens in the eye of God, also turned some of his attention towards changing the political system of Florence. Under the Medici family, only one family ruled Florence and the republic was turned an oligarchy since the Medici were buying votes. Savonarola wished to oust the Medici in order to recreate the republican political system, which was more democratic and representative of all of Florence’s people.

By examining the group mentality and the psychological aspects of Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple, one can use these accounts as reference to the groupthink of the Florentines and Savonarola’s fanaticism. Jim Jones had always been known as a “weird kid”, but his insanity did not truly develop until Jonestown was already brought to fruition. His religious fervor and strong beliefs that what he was doing was right was initially what attracted people to the Peoples Temple. However, as he started using drugs and alcohol, he developed a severe case of paranoia that climaxed when Congressman Ryan visited Guyana, prompting Jones to have Peoples Temple members in Jonestown assassinate Ryan and for Jones to declare that “No man may take my life from me, I lay my life down…if we can't live in peace, then let us die in peace.” As a result, Jones ordered his followers to drink cyanide, causing over 900 people to die. While Savonarola never succumbed to such mental instability as Jones, his intense religious fervor did lead to a partial breakdown, as seen in his self-administered punishment by flagellation. Also, some of Savonarola’s insanity could be seen through his teachings, in that he was merciless towards any who sinned. In the past sins could be forgiven but Savonarola believed that the Florentines should be God-fearing and that the Devil could only be eradicated by destroying material goods.

In addition to examining these two leaders’ mental states during the time of power, an examination of the mental states and the development of groupthink in Jones’ followers can be used to relate how and why the people of Florence also became so rapidly engrossed in this new religious zeal. According to Wikipedia, groupthink is “a psychological phenomenon that occurs within a group of people, in which the desire for harmony or conformity in the group results in an incorrect or deviant decision-making outcome.” This groupthink could be seen in both the Peoples Temple and the Florentines, because both groups lost their sense of individuality and were caught up in the religious fervor brought on by their leaders. As a result, people performed actions as a group in order to stay in the conformity when otherwise as individuals would not; for example, those in Florence harbored a mob mentality towards sinners and all participated in the Bonfire of the Vanities as a result of this groupthink. Similarly, but on a more drastic scale, because of the groupthink phenomena the people in Jonestown killed themselves without a second thought due to their lack of individuality. Loyalty to the group is also a part of the groupthink phenomena, and is exemplified during both events because previous bonds of family and friendship became fragmented. For example, in the documentary one of the survivors from Jonestown recalled how he passed a note to one of the camera men pleading for help to escape, and a little kid began shouting that he passed a note, compromising the man’s safety. Similarly in Florence as a result of the fear of hell and sin families and friends alike turned on each other in order to avoid the wrath of God and Savonarola’s fanciulli. As a result of this developed phenomena, many people lost their lives and were punished in both Jonestown and Florence.

Jonestown can lastly be compared to Savonarola’s reign in Florence by the events leading to each group’s downfall. The clearest similarity between the declines of Jonestown and Florence under Savonarola was that the followers started to lose faith in their leaders. In Florence a famine had struck the citizens, causing unrest among both the poor and the wealthy and some started to question whether Savonarola’s teachings were actually from God; if he was the messenger of God and the people had obeyed his creeds, why was God still punishing them? Even some of his closest supports turned on him, calling him a false prophet and ordering him to partake in a trial by fire to test whether or not God was protecting him. This is similar to some people losing faith in Jim Jones because as some people wished to leave the colony, and were subsequently barred from leaving, they began to question whether or not they were in Jonestown by choice or if they were trapped. In addition, some of the Peoples Temple began to become disenchanted with Jones’ teachings as they discovered that his supposed “miracles” were fake. In the end, it was both Jim Jones and Savonarola’s previous actions and false promises that led to their downfall because once they were discovered as frauds, their own followers turned on them as seen by the Franciscans calling for a trial by fire and for some of the Peoples Temple to plead with Congressman Ryan to help them escape.

After examining the events that occurred at Jonestown, one can better understand the events that occurred in Florence during Savonarola’s reign in the 1490s because of the similarities in their leaders’ rises to power, the psychology of the members of each group, and the reasons the leaders eventually fell from power. Both Jim Jones and Savonarola were charismatic preachers that desired equality and idealism and whose power grew due to the groupthink phenomena that occurred both within the Peoples Temple and the Florentine citizens. However, due to the leaders’ increasing mental instability and their followers that started to question their authority, Jones and Savonarola eventually lost their power, resulting in the catastrophic mass suicide in Jonestown and the deaths of many Florentines, including Savonarola himself.

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