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UTOPIA, DYSTOPIA, AND SUBLIME APOCALYPSE IN MONTANA'S CHURCH UNIVERSAL AND TRIUMPHANT

PAUL F. STARRS and JOHN B. WRIGHT

ABSTRACT. The search for a perfected place on earth is rarely easy or forgiving. Utopias and dystopias demonstrate the practical frailties of attempts to build better human associations, whether as literary efforts or in actual, on-the-ground experiments. With a proprietary interest in evaluating the dimensions of place making, geographers can lay claim to be frontline critics of efforts that attempt to craft a better world. The catalog of personality cultists, charismatically murderous leaders, and apocalyptic mass death is long. The Church Universal and Triumphant, currently of Paradise Valley, Montana, is examined as the home for twenty-five years of an ongoing effort to "improve" lives. If its dilemmas and apparent failures are in keeping with the history of past utopian ventures, geographical lessons remain to be learned about the costs of planning for perfection. *Keywords:* Church Universal and Triumphant, cults, dystopia, geography of religion, Montana, social engineering, utopia.

The human experience constitutes a search for secular and spiritual salvation—for the direct path to a life enlightened by beauty, order, reward, and purpose. Places are humanized landscapes, an ultimate artifact of cultural aspiration, and the transformation of space into place is a compelling vernacular record of an ongoing quest for order and community (Tuan 1975, 2002). Greed and ugliness define many a human construction, but deliberate changes are often made with an eye toward betterment that embodies a creative geography. As J. B. Jackson, Donald Meinig, Dolores Hayden, David Harvey, and Yi-Fu Tuan remind us, the recasting of land into graceful life is a long-standing geographical goal, if not always reliably achieved (Casey 1996, 1997).

An imaginative striving after geographical perfection heavily marbles human history. Although the "everyday" involves its share of woodwork crude with splinters and rough edges, the shape of utopia is more than an abstract intellectual exercise; it looms as a real-time goal (Hine [1953] 1983; Elliott 1970; Harvey 2000). Too often, when the abstract is crafted into an actual experiment, noble intention is derailed by a potent cocktail of paranoia, madness, and violent death: People's Temple, the Branch Davidians, the Temple Solaire, Aum Shinrikyo, Heaven's Gate, and, early in this new millennium, the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God are but a handful of recent examples in which perfectibility turned pogrom (Singer 1996; Economist 1997; Foote 1997; Niebuhr 1997; Carey 1999; Heard 1999; Lifton 1999; Fisher 2000).

Concepts of utopia and dystopia sort into five general, if disparate, classes: religious, political-economic, psychosocial, military, and apocalyptic. With forms both concrete and contemporary, the search for utopia manifests an unmistakable geo-

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raphy, as we argue in our brief examination of the Church Universal and Triumphant (CUT), an entity watched with trepidation through the 1990s in Montana. Its utopian initiative once had high potential, but even in its gloaming days the CUT bristles with an uncertain if looming likelihood for tragedy. Perhaps that will end with personal frailty winning out over apocalypse. In the specific case of the CUT, long-witnessed or at least much-suspected mental pathologies of cult leaders are in evidence, and within that is made clear a telling tale of charismatic decline. A general potential for the distortion of religious utopias into violence is identified in ten key dystopian traits, attributes that are in their own way notably geographical.

UTOPIA AND DYSTOPIA

The rhetoric of paradise is as old as language. Eden, Zion, and the Elysian Fields are more than metaphors for the ideal; they are templates for changing the face of the earth (Levin 1972; Todd and Wheeler 1978; Levitas 1990). Test cases for an idyllic Earth often start as fictional sketches. If a degree of vagueness is tolerated in the background of oil portraits or landscapes, in a utopian literary vision realistic geographical details are crucial compositional elements in a view of the perfectible. In rare cases the blueprints of literary paradises graduate to actual experiments. And precisely there, between the written and the real, is an abiding tension that constitutes the utopian crumple zone.

In the “Epic of Gilgamesh,” 3,000 years old, the legendary King of Uruk made a dangerous journey to Dilmun, the Sumerian land of eternal life. After surviving trials by darkness, mountain firmament, and the visitation of sundry wild beasts, Gilgamesh ascended to leisure, health, contemplation, and eternal youth (Kumar 1991; Huddleston 2003). This ancient story reveals geographical and architectonic components at the heart of a desire to commingle Heaven and Earth. From similar cloth the early English cut an imaginary Land of Cockayne, a place rumored to be so perfect that cooked birds flew into your mouth, rivers ran with wine, sleep produced wealth, sex was abundant, and no one ever died (Elliott 1970). Shambhala, El Dorado, Erewhon, Islandia, and scores of other promised lands drew a complex global cartography of the imagination (Butler [1872] 1981; A. T. Wright 1942; Negley and Patrick 1952; Wegner 2002).¹

Although literary attempts do not reliably convince, there is attention and motion aplenty. Conceptions of “the” ideal place resolutely shift to a time untainted by the sweat and corruption of the present (Weisbrod 1980). Retreat from the travails of the current day into past epochs, believed simpler and more virtuous, is a perennial human theme tagged by Arthur Lovejoy and George Boas as “primitivism” in 1935 (1997). Primitivists seek return to a previous time of simpler choices and lifeways, consciously tumbling past the entangling rungs of a perceived ladder of progress. Primitivist impulses are famously universal: Jews thirsted for the lost Kingdom of Israel; the English, for the Saxon Golden Age; the Chinese, for the Taoist Age of Perfect Virtue. In essence, the texts of Plato, Virgil, and Ovid established a rhetorical form, a search for the ideal, that spaded the ground with a continuity beyond dis-

pute for such Renaissance epistles as Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* (Bacon [1627] 1942; Manuel 1966; Levin 1972; Ferguson 1975; Heinberg 1989; Bobonich 2002; Kendrick 2004).

Within the canonical doctrines of primitivism, perfection is accepted as long gone, and the place of humans is to return—as fast and drastically as possible—to the clarity, righteousness, and balance of antiquity. Because this is self-evidently impossible to accomplish temporally, the return is to be done spatially, in the crafting of new cities, communities, and landscapes embracing superior forms (Mumford 1962; Harvey 2000; Verheul 2004). In this new geography lies an explicit argument that, if the proper place and form are embraced, a better earth results, whether in new capitals or countries such as Brasília or Liberia, in the kibbutz, in the reformed urban core, or in the suburban gated community (McKenzie 2005; Sanchez, Lang, and Dhavale 2005).

Sublime geographies arise in this formula, from intellect and spirit; from the interplay of philosophy, economics, theology; and in a strain of social engineering still implicit in much of latter-day land-use planning and even within architecture (Popper 1971; Coleman 2000). Presumably there was an ideal form of cities or farms, of family relations or sexual politics, of religious meditation or philosophical reflexivity. The American Enlightenment, including such eventually bruised undertakings as the township-and-range land-division system, was taken to be, at least, a sizable movement toward a more perfect society (Gates 1950; Hanson 1999). The impulse was everywhere—in Jeffersonian democracy of the eighteenth century, in rampant utopianism of the nineteenth century that included the so-called Burned-Over District of upstate New York, and in its consequent product, the fundamentals of Mormonism (Cross 1950; Arrington, Fox, and May 1976). So too would be inspired the cults of the twentieth century and, through a millennial push, their transplantation (or renewal) into the twenty-first century (Baumgartner 1999).

As the literary scholar Robert Elliott noted (1960, 1970) in two remarkable studies of utopian urges—and often dystopian outcomes—a seeking after the ideal was conventionally justified in prose with a concerted savaging of the real world. Utopianism was bonded to satire, and it is still (Goin and Starrs 2005). The Satyricon was a festival devoted to explicit criticism—if drunken, and therefore presumably more freewheeling and excusable—of the ruling order. So any search for utopia is innately a critical process, a testing, with underpinnings of political and dialectical reason. Defects of the present, made explicit, help dissipate the sting of potential privations that might be involved in marshaling the phalanx of the “perfect” (Elliott 1960, 1970; Wegner 2002).

Thomas More's *Utopia* gave an indelible semantic stamp to the construction of paradise (More [1516] 2002). Only a naïf, however, could read More's seemingly idealistic work as anything short of a robust critique (Johnson 1969). The satire of *Utopia* served as a politically acceptable vehicle for More to voice indignation with the English of wealth and power who were scraping their boots on the necks of the poor. The narrator/traveler in *Utopia* was Raphael Hythloday, a name that trans-

lates as “a distributor of nonsense.” More conjured a Utopia lying in the New World, a short distance beyond North America. The essential geographical elusiveness of this sixteenth-century place was a biting commentary on repeatedly unkept ruling-class promises to reform English society, which within a hundred years would hemorrhage land-hungry dissenters to Plymouth, Massachusetts and environs.² The title of More’s tract reveals his agenda—as anyone from the classically educated gentry would readily have known, “utopia” translates from the Greek as “no place.” More carefully avoided a related spelling, “eutopia,” because it means “a good place.” Words define worlds.

More’s vision of a 100,000-square-mile island off the coast of “Somewhere” was geographically detailed in its settlement patterns, road networks, and architecture. The economy would be communitarian, the family structure monogamous and paternalistic, the theology pagan—all carefully faceted by reason. Yet More was not above unconsciously importing racism and social inequality. A central irony of Utopia was that black slaves were necessary to assure the leisure and prosperity of the down-trodden whites he sought to liberate. An inoculation of paradise with human prejudice, ignorance, and inconsistency is hardly exclusive to Thomas More. Most such visions suffer in varying degrees the same grand and glorious catch-22: Imperfect human beings cannot conceive of a truly perfect world, let alone bring one to life. In some cases, this forgivable weakness of commission gives way to cultural pathologies and the creation of revanchist landscapes of fear and death—“dystopias,” places ethically dysfunctional in the extreme.

An odd but maybe ultimately predictable changeover follows from the mid-nineteenth-century days of the Industrial Revolution through the end of the twentieth century. The change in economic structure is paralleled in utopianism. There was in the 1800s considerable high thinking about ideal places, and, through the century, construction of literary—and a number of practicing—utopias was common. Many were the arguments over the proper constituent parts of perfection. But the 1900s saw a deliberate topical shift from utopia to dystopia; with the cupboard for optimism evidently bare in the wake of two world wars and the rise of communism, the naysayers increased their admonitions about the dangers of earthly delight. Yet practice—and the proliferation—of experimental, or intentional, communities would also kick into high gear by the late 1960s, with Summer of Love optimism (Vance 1972; Sangissoon and Sargent 2004).³

UTOPIAN VISIONS AND ACTUAL COMMUNITIES

The diverse attempts to apply a proper voltage to bring utopian visions to life are testimony to the power of the schism. The past holds the elaborate record of an inescapable human impulse to splinter from whatever passes for prevailing wisdom. Utopias are religious and secular, wildly sexual and simply celibate, rural-agrarian and urban-industrial, misogynist and feminist, centralized and anarchic, capitalist and communal, peaceful and profoundly violent (Todd and Wheeler 1978; Olson 1982). Perfection is ascribed to the past, the present, and the future.

Many utopias were local, centered on retreat into a single refuge where a small band of chosen people labored to transform chaos into cosmos; this was the ideal of such prominent experiments in intentional community as Brook Farm, but it was also the practice of literally thousands of communes along the Pacific slope—and nationwide—in the 1960s and 1970s (Kanter 1972; Vance 1972; Callenbach 1975). Others were expansionistic and universalizing, with an aggressive emphasis on conversion of both people and places. The irresolved facets of human-riven paradise amply reveal the conflicted nature of the human species.

Utopias can be religious, political-economic, psychosocial, military, and apocalyptic, in a broad classification that is nonetheless useful. Although the distinction between each class is far from rigid, the framework provides an analytical context (Kanter 1972).

Religious utopian visions often manifest themselves as a sectarian cleaving from the corpus of a dominant church. The Protestant Reformation is among history's most dramatic examples. However, most truly utopian sects tend to arise from more localized heresies and deistic innovations that are professed by a relatively small number of adherents. The Amish, Mennonites, Oneida Perfectionists, Shakers, and Amana Inspirationists are long-standing Christian and relatively compact communities in the United States (Bach 1961; Holloway 1966; Crowley 1978; Moment and Kraushaar 1980; Stein 1992).

The trajectory of the Mormon (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints) utopian experiment is precisely the opposite (J. B. Wright 1993). With its focus on large families and a highly organized missionary effort, Mormonism grew from a few dozen followers of Joseph Smith in 1830 to more than 12 million members spread around the world (LDS 2004). Even such numerical success is not without splinters—the Mormon Church has its “reorganized” offshoot, which supporters claim holds true to a body of beliefs more in keeping with the original intent of the official father church.

Religious utopias need not, of course, be Judeo-Christian. Followers of the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh practiced free love and Hindu-inflected meditation and chanting in the wilds of east-central Oregon (Figure 1) until tax troubles (and the arrest of the ruling junta) resulted in the deportation of their leader, who renamed himself “Osho” just before his death in 1990. The hedonistic, farming-based community, known as “Rajneeshpuram,” promptly collapsed (Price 1985; Hale 1995). Regardless of outcome, religious utopias place a defining emphasis on theological and spiritual matters, making their continued existence particularly fragile.⁴

Utopias focused on political economy range from those that are purely secular to those with a paralleling religious core. During the Industrial Revolution the factory system and the rampant exploitation of labor elicited new theories on socio-economic organization from such people as Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, and Karl Marx (Beecher and Bienvenu 1972; Hayden 1976; Sciabarra 1995).

Secular utopian efforts are not inherently doomed to fail. So much of the geography of utopia invokes attempts to do something better—whatever the “thing”



FIG. 1—When the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh came from Pune, India, to the Big Muddy Ranch, in east-central Oregon, with him came a sizable number of *sanyassin* (followers, believers, or adherents), counting themselves as the bhagwan’s faithful. The bhagwan’s choice of location was flawless, but his evaluation of the people of the area was less so. Strife and conspiracy were rife. Although the bhagwan went unimplicated, some of his senior-most advisors were indicted, and later jailed, for conspiracy to commit murder. The experiment of the self-proclaimed “rich man’s guru” was less than an entire success. (Photograph by Paul F. Starrs, summer 1988)

may be: agriculture, town founding, social relations, salvaging technology, improving transportation. Little that humans do is designed to fail; it is the very attempt to make something better that defines much human enterprise. Such hopefulness, and the artifice that goes with it, only rarely become destructive, obsessive, and otherwise weird: The question is, at what point is that threshold crossed?

American examples alone are instructive. Irrigationist colonies of California proved sufficiently accomplished communal ventures that such modern cities as Anaheim, Merced, and Fresno have shouldered their way into the twenty-first century; encomia from F. W. Newell, William “Ham” Hall, William Smythe, and others boosted western irrigation as the ideal culture (Pisani 1984; Rumsey and Punt 2004). The same tenor, and no less success, came in the Southland with citrus culture—especially orange growing—and lasted into the 1940s (Starrs 1988). In Colorado alone, three major cities started as centrally planned “colonies” with at least some communal aspects: Greeley (1870, Union Colony), Longmont (1870, Chicago-Colorado Colony), and Colorado Springs (1872, Fountain Colony) (Brown 1948). Outlying

religious colonies such as those of the Mennonites or Mormons can be acclaimed successes—and sometimes brilliant ones (J. B. Wright 2001; Bowen 2002). Yet, ironically, there is probably more awareness of the failed “experiments” than of the efforts that successfully blend into the landscape.

All surviving religious utopian communities entrain and internalize a viable political-economic strategy. The staunchly “plain” Amish, Mennonite, and Hutterite communities have survived since the nineteenth century because of their skill as both farmers and merchants (Erasmus 1977; Thomas 1983). The Amanite Colonies in the Midwest are more than a century old and operate because of careful adaptation, which includes marketing of goods ranging from woolens to microwave ovens.

Mormonism has persisted for 175 years by wholeheartedly incorporating free-market capitalism into a way of life once grounded on cooperative farming as a brace against the modern world. Every Israeli kibbutz has a similarly mixed religious, cultural, and economic identity. Utopian theology without a positive balance sheet has most often resulted in the demise of the community. Groups such as the Essenes, the Ephratians, and the Order of Enoch succumbed to entropy in large measure because of poor economic viability (Kumar 1987, 1991). Even such attempts as the protoliterary Brook Farm, which included Nathaniel Hawthorne and was later scored in his *Blithedale Romance*, descended into a centripetal disorder of ego and arrogance that came into direct conflict with a need to do real work in order to eat (Gross and Murphy 1978; Delano 2004; Verheul 2004).

All utopian constructs have a strong psychosocial element. However, many visions are sufficiently literary, imaginative, or cautionary to form a separate class (Snodgrass 1995). Clear examples include: H. G. Wells’s futurist speculations (1928), Aldous Huxley’s terrifying *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell’s 1984 doublespeak ([1949] 1992), and the behavioral engineering contained in B. F. Skinner’s *Walden Two* (1948). Francis Bacon’s positivist “New Atlantis” (1627) and Auguste Comte’s *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830–1842) well represent a promodernity school that regards science as savior (Bacon [1627] 1942; Project Clotilde 2000).

In opposition to sallow scientism stands *News from Nowhere*, a vintage 1890 proenvironment work by William Morris that drew from Virgil’s Arcadian musings and laid the groundwork for the back-to-the-land movement and hippie communes of the 1960s (Morris [1890] 1970). That Morris was a polymath made his effort especially intriguing to later observers, although many found his aesthetic sense in typography, textiles, and art rather superior to his principles of social engineering. Ernest Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* (1975) distilled Morris’s fertile concepts with additions of Callenbach’s own into a best seller that blended a romanticizing of Nature with an idealization of Marxism, bioregional totalitarianism, and faith in human reason, spawning a huge added literature.

New Age beliefs in harmonic convergences, “power spots,” lei lines, and *fengshui* amend this ecological lineage to include mysticism and the relentless pursuit of health through myriad arcane therapies for a suite of angst-driven maladies.

Communities such as Santa Fe, New Mexico, Sedona, Arizona, and Mount Shasta City, California are now widely viewed by New Age devotees as stylish promised lands from which a relentlessly mellow world will spring (Bloom 1992; Huntsinger and Fernández-Giménez 2000).

Gender inequality leads to a diverse assemblage of feminist utopian views (Bartkowsky 1989; Jones and Goodwin 1990; Keulen 1991; Siebers 1994). Mary Griffith's *Three Hundred Years Hence* imagined a world in which women would, through both energetic pursuit of social reform and sensitive child rearing, bring about an end to war ([1836] 1975). Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* criticized the subordination of women by imagining a matriarchal society high in remote mountains where a pastoral, egalitarian life flourished ([1917] 1979). A voluminous feminist literature has appeared since then, including *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*, by Ursula Le Guin (1974), *The Wanderground*, by Sally Gearhart (1979), and *Motherlines*, by Suzy Charnas (1978). These are no mere works of social or science fiction but able critiques designed to stimulate the creation of more socially just geographies (Pfaelzer 1984; Roberts 1993; Donawerth and Kolmerten 1994).

Land-use planning and architecture offer diverse visions of perfectible landscapes. The agrarian ideal of the yeoman farmer promoted by Thomas Jefferson and Hector St. John de Crevecoeur led to numerous homesteading bills designed to fill the American West with righteous folk far from the degradation of urban life (Webb 1931; Coleman 2000). Le Corbusier's mechanistic *Radiant City* offered precisely the opposite view of the ideal ([1933] 1967, 1947). However, outside the cartoon cubicles of *Dilbert* in daily newspapers, the fabrication of modest but identical spaces for human beings is accepted far more as architectural idealization than as a realistic social agenda.

The idea that buildings and cities should be machines for living was vigorously opposed by the Garden Cities, City Beautiful, and land trust / greenways movements (Noto 1971). Yet the tension over technology and modernity continues, from Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) to brilliant science fiction ventures such as the trilogy of *Matrix* films and the extraordinary Gene Roddenbury conception of "The Borg" in television's *Star Trek: Next Generation* (Boyd 2001). On earthly ground the problems are more obvious, and in Arizona two strikingly different utopias are being tested. The precise Fulleresque domes of Biospheres I and II stand just a short distance from Paolo Soleri's rambling, aesthetically disjunct ecotopia known as "Arcosanti" (2005). Neither venture shows great promise of spawning a movement, but both sets of advocates are passionate.

Military force, when applied to enforce racist utopias, can generate something on the scale of the Third Reich's "Final Solution," which led to the murder of 6 million people, including Jews, Roma (gypsies), and diverse others (Fasching 1993). Genocidal attacks by Turks on Armenians, Serbian Christians on Bosnian Muslims, and Hutus on Tutsis in Rwanda are but a few examples of the mad, dystopian drive toward "ethnic cleansing"—the bleaching clean of a geographical slate, free of those deemed unfit to share an "ideal" world (Kumar 1987).



FIG. 2—The Heaven's Gate cult, unknown to most Americans except for its Web presence until 1997, came apart in a ritual suicide in Rancho Santa Fe, California. The Web site was almost immediately taken off-line, but it is preserved elsewhere on the Internet as a caution (see [www.wave.net/upg/gate/index.htm]).

Apocalyptic utopias evolve when religious visions of an imminent perfected world are contaminated by insanity (Cohn 1993). Sects or “cults” have a single charismatic leader whose degenerative slide from paranoia into madness is interpreted by followers as heralding the arrival of an awaited prophet. As imagined Armageddon grows ever nearer, the mental pathologies of the leader infect the membership. Guns—or lower-tech devices of devastation—are accumulated, and a siege mentality cuts the group off from leavening contact with the outside world. Conflicts with government agencies and neighbors increase.

A utopia built on institutionalized anxiety and automatic weapons explodes in a dystopian hail of death or, in a way no less macabre, through an enforced imbibing of poisoned Kool-Aid. In Jonestown, Guiana, cyanide and gunfire claimed 914 people in the 1978 People's Temple serial set piece of suicide. In Waco, Texas, eighty succumbed in 1993 when David Koresh's Branch Davidians went up in flames, thanks in part to the incompetence of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. In Switzerland (1994), twenty-five members of the Temple Solaire cult died in a ritualistic circle. In South Korea (1987), thirty-one followers of Park Soon Ja gave up their lives rather than live on in a flawed world. The Aum Shinrikyo group in Japan attempted to inflict sarin gas on subway commuters to demonstrate their power and their repudiation of mainstream society. At Heaven's Gate, in rabidly upscale Rancho Santa Fe,

California, thirty-nine computer-addled cultists died in a 1997 mass overdose, awaiting the arrival of the galactic mother ship (Figure 2). And in 2000 some 924 southern Ugandan followers of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God were burned to death because they demanded a return of their property and money when the end of the world did not come—the murders evidently carried out by their own avenging angel leadership in the person of former school administrator and sect leader Joseph Kibwetere (Fisher 2000). The ghastly Jonestown body count is now eclipsed: How much the downing of the Twin Towers on 9/11 represents the outcome of a dystopian effort launched against a perceived enemy remains conjecture, but the undertaking undoubtedly has religious elements and, as such, reminds the world about the robust underpinnings of racial hatred.

Apocalyptic groups often spring from such misdirected millenarian hatred and the anticipation of a divine advent where participants, as the chosen people, live beyond cleansing fires or scarifying floods in a peaceful Kingdom of God on Earth. For those doomed by dementia, optimism is replaced by a hungering for the seamless perfection of death.

The preceding structural framework may assist in defining and interpreting the essence of utopian communities and concepts. This is particularly important in attempting the most difficult and risky of tasks—discerning the difference between visions and movements that are reformist and part of the enriching process of cultural differentiation and those that have the potential to enrapture and kill (Richter 1975). Which utopias will morph to dystopias? Which will rise like feral toxins only to contract or dissolve back to harmlessness?

THE CHURCH UNIVERSAL AND TRIUMPHANT

In 1981 a Los Angeles-based sect known as the “Church Universal and Triumphant” bought a 12,000-acre property from the biker, balloonist, and billionaire Malcolm Forbes, a ranch bordering Yellowstone National Park in Paradise Valley, Montana (Dillow 1985; J. B. Wright 1998) (Figure 3). Another 20,000 acres were purchased nearby. Thousands of followers moved into Livingston or onto church lands. Conflicts between CUT members and local Montanans were immediate and intense (Robbins 1988; Whitsel 2003). Today, an uncertain specter of violence continues to cast a vacillating, if fading, shadow across Paradise Valley.

“Church Universal and Triumphant” is the current name for a sect that originated in the 1880s under the direction of Madame Blavatsky on the East Coast (Webster 1985; J. B. Wright 1998). In the 1920s a belief in “Ascended Masters” was taught by Baird T. Spaulding as part of the “I AM” movement. Guy and Edna Ballard expanded this faith during the 1930s as part of the “Mighty I AM” craze, which claimed 3 million members before entering dormancy in the 1940s.

In 1958 Mark Prophet established the Summit Lighthouse, near Washington, D.C., based on these teachings. In 1961 he married Elizabeth Clare Wulf of New Jersey. Upon his death, in 1973, Elizabeth Clare Prophet took over and soon renamed the organization the “Church Universal and Triumphant” (Billings Gazette

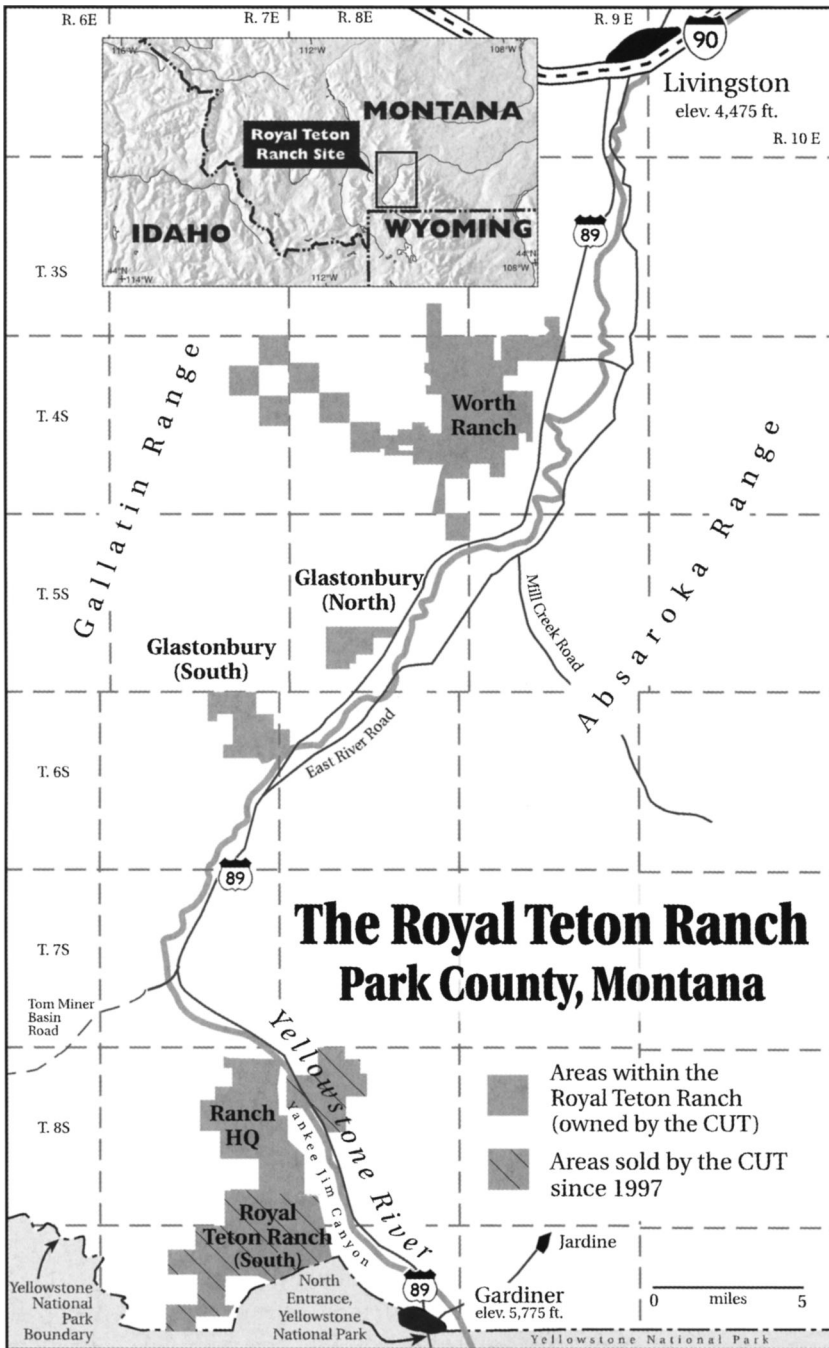


FIG. 3—Territory purchased by the Church Universal and Triumphant, Paradise Valley, Montana. Some of the vast ranch territory acquired by the CUT in the 1980s has been sold off in private contracts or, in the southernmost stretches of the ranch, to the federal government in a complex transaction with the National Park Service. (Cartography by Paul F. Starrs, after a base map by John B. Wright)

1987; Whitsel 2003; CUT 2005). The church was moved to Colorado, Idaho, and Los Angeles before descending on Montana. Today the CUT asserts that it has 300,000 members worldwide in some forty countries. However, Montana is where the “Heart of the Inner Retreat” has been established on the church’s Royal Teton Ranch (Figure 4). This CUT Vatican City and adjacent church-platted subdivisions are now home to some 700 of the sect’s most ardent believers (J. B. Wright 1998; McMillion 2005b; CUT 2005).

The theology of the CUT is a miasmatic blend of New Age mysticism, astrology, Christianity, reincarnation, Confucianism, kundalini yoga, sun worship, and anti-communism, with spins on the legends of Atlantis and King Arthur. Elizabeth Clare Prophet serves as an all-powerful, charismatic leader—“Guru Ma” or “Mother”—who “dictates” the spiritual teachings of various “Ascended Masters” through a form of spiritual channeling (Prophet 1988). More than 2,000 “dictations” from these “masters” now fill scores of volumes (McMillion 1998). CUT believers follow the revealed wisdom of the “Lords of the Seven Rays”: El Morya, Lanto, Paul the Venetian, Serapis Bey, Hilarion, Lady Master Nada (formerly a lawyer on Atlantis), and Saint Germain (Prophet and Prophet 1986). Each of these lords is assigned a chakra, color, gemstone, emotional quality, talent, day of the week, and geographical retreat. Lord Lanto’s retreat is the nearby Grand Teton Mountains. CUT literature “quotes” from these spirits as well as from the “lost teachings” of Jesus Christ (Prophet and Prophet 1988), Buddha, and essences known as “Mighty Cosmos,” “Sanat Kumara,” and “K-17” (who heads the “Cosmic Secret Service of the Great White Brotherhood”) (Prophet 1987). The church is on record as believing that aliens are abducting human beings to harvest DNA for reinvigorating their dying races (CUT 1988a, 1988b).

Elizabeth Clare Prophet’s instructional writings are engorged with the cryptic terminology of solar hierarchies, electronic belts, ascension dossiers, triangles of initiation, dispensation of the violet flame, and etheric retreats. Reincarnation links Thomas More and George Washington with Ascended Master El Morya (Prophet 1988). The Statue of Liberty is believed to embody a spirit once residing on Atlantis that gave birth to Paul the Venetian. The pantheon also includes Hercules and Snow White. Prayer comes in the form of “decreeing”—the practice of repeating spiritual chants for up to five hours each day at hypnotic speed. Charges of mind control are made, and CUT members are sometimes captured by their parents and “deprogrammed” to reverse the effects of this spiritual mesmerism. However, most church members appear to remain involved of their own volition.

Paranoia and the anticipation of Armageddon defined the CUT way of life for much of the 1980s and 1990s. Prophet predicted that the world would end in a nuclear holocaust on a variety of dates, including 2 October 1989 and 21 March 1990. Even as these dates and others came and went, church holdings in Montana continued to be developed as a refuge from that always-approaching apocalypse (CUT 1988a; Knauber 1988; J. B. Wright 1998; McMillion 2005b). The CUT constructed a bomb shelter that could house 756 people for seven years; dues had to be paid up to reserve a spot. Two massive subdivision projects totaling 4,000 acres, known as “Glastonbury

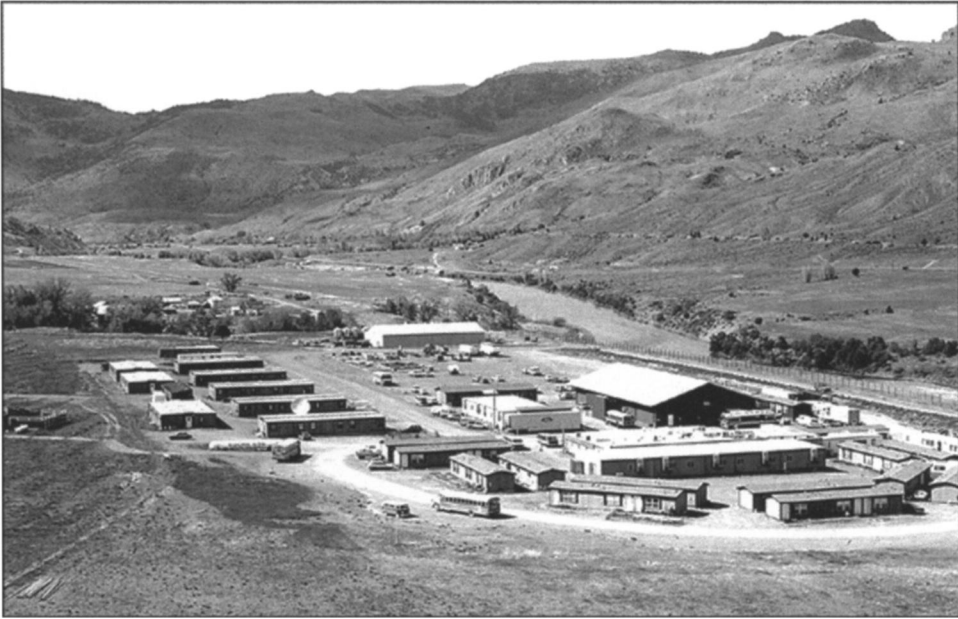


FIG. 4—The sizable, almost urban-scale, presence of the Royal Teton Ranch is a far departure from the more typically bucolic presence of its earlier days, under the ownership of the megabucks publisher and investor Malcolm Forbes. The array of buildings was in part purchased and moved from the Big Muddy Ranch, site of Rajneeshpuram, after Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh was evicted from the United States under pressure from the Immigration and Naturalization Service; there is indeed continuity among American utopian ventures. (Photograph by John B. Wright, summer 1994)

North” and “Glastonbury South,” were platted for church members. Restrictive covenants of these housing developments originally required the construction of more than forty-five bomb shelters. The CUT’s development scenarios held room for 6,000 people in a county with a 1990 population of less than 15,000 (J. B. Wright 1998; McMillion 2005b).

Acquisition and stockpiling of guns were part of the group’s doomsday planning. In 1989 Edward Francis, who had wed the widow Prophet, was arrested and pled guilty to federal firearms charges (J. B. Wright 1998). Twenty CUT members were implicated. A complex scheme was revealed dating back to the early 1970s that involved the purchase of a huge array of weapons, including 50-caliber semiautomatic rifles. A group known as the “Rocky Mountain Sportsmen’s Survival Club” served as a front for church firearms training.

In 1992 the Internal Revenue Service revoked the CUT’s tax-exempt status due to gun running and allegations of tax evasion related to receipts from land development and other business ventures (LE 1993b). In 1993 it was discovered that the church had purchased two Saracen Armored Personnel Carriers from a New Jersey company known as “Tanks A Lot” (J. B. Wright 1998). John Sullivan, publisher of the *Livingston Enterprise*, opined that “Waco, Texas, is Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood compared to what we’ve got here” (RTD 1993). When the Branch Davidian com-



FIG. 5—The handsome terrain along the tributary and main streams of the Yellowstone River make the Royal Teton Ranch among the more prized settings in the Northern Rockies, and it has proved home to an ongoing series of migrants who find the country between Livingston and Gardiner an especially attractive 36 miles. The ongoing presence of the Church Universal and Triumphant has, therefore, proved less than palliative. In fact, the federal government has purchased some parts of the ranch rather than be forced to permit development of some of the local hydrothermal resources—which are also believed to feed the geysers at Mammoth Hot Springs. (Photograph by John B. Wright, summer 1994)

pound was destroyed in March 1993, CUT officials quietly removed the personnel carriers from Montana and shipped them away for storage (LE 1993a). In 1994 the CUT's tax-exempt status was reinstated in exchange for a \$2.6 million tax settlement and a promise from the sect to disarm.

Locals reported hearing extended weapons fire on church land at night. Although the neighborhood fusillades have mostly stopped, a nearby rancher remains suspicious—sharing with us his view that, “If those people don't still have an underground warehouse of weapons, I'll kiss a cow.” Although the CUT still professes peaceful intentions, for twenty years an enemies list was maintained of people deemed “Malintents and Burdens.” During the 1990s the church printed forms for “decreeing” against critics, who included members of the media, the local county planner and Planning Board, U.S. Forest Service officials, neighboring ranchers, and the Episcopal, Catholic, and Methodist Churches. The form reads: “I demand a bolt of Blue Lightning in through the cause and core of all criticism, condemnation and judgement from (Insert Name).” The church's veiled threats of retaliation, legacy of armaments, and smiling anticipation of a postnuclear Camelot tend to render locals a smidgen ill at ease.

The environmental impact of CUT's activities also created conflict with nearby residents and conservationists. The wide assortment of residential, commercial, and agricultural processing developments on the church's property was the subject of an Environmental Impact Statement in the mid-1980s (Knauber 1988) (Figure 5). Some of the feared damage never materialized, but significant destructive exploitation did. The CUT stored more than 600,000 gallons of gasoline and diesel fuel and 300,000 gallons of propane in underground storage tanks near its massive fallout shelter. In 1990, 31,000 gallons of fuel leaked into Mol Heron Creek, a prime spawning stream for Yellowstone cutthroat trout in the region (J. B. Wright 1998). Individual fallout shelters, many of them now in a state of some disrepair, were built with integral fuel-storage tanks, and the prospects of leakage from those is an ongoing source of dismay for national-forest, Yellowstone National Park, wildlife, and water-quality officials in the area (McMillion 2005b).

The effects of escalating ecological tensions are still being felt. In the 1980s the church began pumping water from LaDuke Hot Spring to heat greenhouses for a commercial carrot operation. Environmentalists feared that this would harm nearby Yellowstone Park's geothermal features and sued to stop the pumping (Males 1986). Portions of the boundary of the Royal Teton Ranch have a perimeter fence that blocks elk, antelope, and other wildlife species from moving out of Yellowstone Park downslope into vital winter range habitats (Figure 6). A regional wildlife official opines that the CUT property is a "black hole for grizzly bears" because, in his experience, "griz go in and they don't come out," and in the late 1980s a Yellowstone National Park official "declared the church the single biggest threat to the integrity of the Park" (McMillion 2005b).

However, it is the grand scale of the overall CUT development vision itself that most upsets local residents. The people of Paradise Valley reluctantly accepted such Hollywood and literary newcomers such as Peter Fonda, Meg Ryan, Dennis Quaid, and the late Richard Brautigan because, overall, they led quiet lives. The CUT still stands apart, an edgy neighbor since 1986, when it abandoned a California base to transform a conservative rural Montana landscape into a singular, militantly secretive domain (Whitsel 2003).

Recent changes diffused some of this tension. In 1998 the church admitted what CUT watchers had long suspected: Elizabeth Clare Prophet was suffering from an unspecified mental problem. It was revealed that, as far back as 1993, she could not remember the name "Jesus Christ" during a speech (McMillion 1998). Prophet alleged for a time that her condition was merely epilepsy, but family members have since confirmed in public statements that the underlying problem is Alzheimer's (McMillion 2005a). This cruel, mind-destroying disease may help explain some of Prophet's increasingly adventurous theological pronouncements in recent years. With the failing health of the CUT's charismatic leader and the failure of Armageddon to arrive, church membership has contracted about 30 percent, causing serious financial problems. Gilbert Cleirbaut, for a number of years the CUT's secular president, announced that he "wanted his church to stop acting like a 'cult'" and

disposed of some of the church lands to make up the financial shortfall (McMillion 2005b).

A certain fiscal austerity and image rehabilitation overtook the CUT early in the new millennium. After the 1999 resource swap, Montana U.S. Sen. Max Baucus gushed that “they’re a wonderful, wonderful bunch of people,” according to Scott McMillion (2005b), who writes regularly about the region for various Montana and western newspapers. Conservation easements are set for some 6,000 acres of CUT land, and, on the Glastonbury subdivisions, people of any religion—or none—can now buy acreage. Plans to build a new town the size of Gardiner—nearing 1,000 residents—were quietly put aside, according to McMillion and other Montana sources (2005a, 2005b).

In the late 1990s the CUT sold another 2,150 acres and ceded a 1,500-acre conservation easement on land near Yellowstone National Park to the U.S. Forest Service for \$6.5 million (CUT 1999; McMillion 1999). Conservationists applauded the transaction. But the outcome is uncertain, and, in CUT utterances of the late 1990s, some continued seeing a profound messianic menace (Mann 1999). The 1999 agreement that protects bison and trades rights to “underground supplies of hot water which, if tapped, might disrupt geysers and hot springs in the park” gave the church \$13 million and extensive surface-water rights, a prospect not altogether encouraging to neighbors (Wald 1999). The resource swap actually allowed the CUT to consolidate acreage, which “will give the church more land near [the] fallout shelter it maintains” (Wald 1999).

A 2003 issue of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation newsletter thanks “The Church Universal and Triumphant (CUT), which in 1999 swung one of the most important elk habitat land-protection deals in the history of the Elk Foundation, and graciously donated the use of the Forbes Cabin on a portion of the property it still owns on the Royal Teton Ranch” (Schott 2003). Further publicity for the CUT came in an oblique way in 2003, when Christopher Paolini, a fifteen-year-old from Paradise Valley, published *Eragon*, which for a time outsold four of the five then-published Harry Potter books and is available in eleven foreign languages. Paolini’s parents were early CUT members, and, although they left the group in 1991, they remained in the valley, along the Yellowstone River. Homeschooled, young Chris and sister Angela grew up next to what the *New York Times* in 2003 described as “a survivalist group with a doomsday philosophy” (Smith 2003). Nonetheless, in 2005, at the main CUT headquarters in Corwin Springs, church officials began work on a new office building of 18,000 square feet (McMillion 2005b).

With a strong Internet presence, the CUT, through its Summit Lighthouse imprint, reaches out widely, even globally, with satellite operations in thirty-eight other countries, publications in twenty-four languages, and sales now said to be at an all-time high (McMillion 2005b). The CUT shows signs of turning a corner, shifting since 1999 and the announcement of Prophet’s illness to a flexible posture with less leader-driven autocracy, and, on the local scene, evincing more neighborliness and realism than mail-fist authority. Such changes are by no means unheard of in utopian movements—driven by pressures of the moment, rapture need not always lead



FIG. 6—The Absaroka Range looms in the distance; in the foreground are two of the trailers installed by the Church Universal and Triumphant. It is this territory that no small part of the Yellowstone-area wildlife would normally traverse, but the migrations are affected by fences and a substantial human presence. (Photograph by John B. Wright, summer 1994)

to rupture, and the hard work of a whole chain of CUT leaders is producing significant accommodations that suggest a more benign presence than was the rule under the staunch eye of Prophet.

DISAGGREGATION & DISILLUSIONMENT

The boundary between utopia and dystopia is far from discrete. Cultural and ideological bias can lead to ethical and definitional problems. Because belief systems are by their very nature alien and eccentric to nonbelievers, caution must be exercised in the delineation of any utopian conviction as “dangerous.” Political and religious repression can easily be given the cachet of law enforcement if the group involved is officially declared a “cult” or a “subversive organization” by a brutal or even fascist elite. The government of the People’s Republic of China argues, for example, that Falun Gong is a religious cult; the even-tempered response from within that they are variously a meditation group, a “peaceful self-improvement practice,” or a legitimate spiritual movement—as well as no small increment of foreign pressure—has left the Chinese government so far unswayed. The contrasting views are as old as religion itself (O’Meara and Koehler 2003; Sangissoon and Sargent 2004).

The actions of the CUT and the regional responses to it raise a crucial question: At what point do odd neighbors, which too often means those unlike us, become something to fret about or, even more, pose an active threat? The CUT has learned to

ease back on some of its odder statements; much of the dispute is currently internal, as church officials recognize that Elizabeth Clare Prophet's retirement is permanent and argue about which of eight major figures around the world now taking "dictations" in her stead are legitimate and which are pretenders or apostates (McMillion 2005a).

But the potential for renewed regional dissent is hardly dead and buried. And the world is full of apparently benign groups with eruptive potential. We ask ourselves all the time: At what point does the unworrisome temple or meditation group next door become a concern? When firepower and target practice are added? When the number of followers trebles or sextuples? When, in a phrase of our day, is the tipping point reached? (Gladwell 2000). Too much finger pointing and rank accusation are sure infringements on liberty, and groups that start out as autocratic can indeed scale back to become good neighbors, as the CUT seeks to do.

A core of diagnostic dystopian attributes emerges when analyzing the essential matrix of utopian theses. If the imagined paradise is defined by racism, sexism, paranoia, environmental destruction, and the loss of civil liberties, personal autonomy, and actual lives, then "dystopia" becomes a fair characterization of the vision. In practice, intellectual innovations that manifest fresh reconfigurations of geography are not so simple to evaluate.

Apocalyptic religious groups severely restrict the individual freedom of members and tend to manifest a distinctive array of dystopian traits. Groups that might be deemed "cults" with a significant potential for violence are those that: have a powerful, charismatic leader who is considered a prophet; tightly curtail the flow of information into the group and practice internal policing of members to control dissent; extract large sums of money from members as a requirement for "enlightenment"; enforce the separation of members from their families and friends; preach an ever-changing, indecipherable theology; make tangible plans and set dates for the arrival of Armageddon; develop a siege mentality and retrench into a compound; stockpile food, water, and fuel; acquire weapons and train church members in their use; and serve as a "totalizing" influence on members' lives and after-lives.

Many groups display some of these traits. Scientology was started by an inventive if eccentric leader, L. Ron Hubbard, who produced a convoluted ideology of seemingly endless "levels" at which members can "clear" their mental confusion only by making massive payments to the church. Yet Scientologists are not barricading themselves into a rural fortress and hefting rifles. The Unification Church is a totalizing faith minus a siege mentality and simmering violence. Conversely, the neo-Nazi Aryan Nation has manifested all ten traits marking dangerously violent dystopian paths, including the survivalist craving for a "White Christian" race-war apocalypse. In general, the greater the number of traits that apply to a sect, the greater its likelihood for violence.

The Church Universal and Triumphant offers a cautionary tale. During the group's cold war peak of paranoia, its first responses were guns, armored personnel

carriers, bomb shelters, and mind control. Now the CUT is less overtly threatening, although many local residents and outsiders worry about what it is up to.

It is difficult to tell what residue remains of that Orwellian incendiary bent. If weapons, festering fear, and an invasive control of members' actions remain loose in the CUT's wild Montana fastness, these should serve as warning signs of a cult that is still moving on a path toward tragedy. If this church has reformed, as evidence starts to suggest, tragedy may have been forestalled.

But history can turn on fine lines. Elizabeth Clare Prophet, the CUT's once infallible "Mother," is now living in Bozeman, mentally challenged with a grave illness requiring a round-the-clock staff of caretakers (McMillion 1998, 2005a). What are members to make of her endless flow of books containing an expanding arc of bizarre, often contradictory, teachings? Many CUT members were wounded by traumatic life experiences and suffer from low self-esteem. In the past, Prophet's obfuscation was precisely the tool needed to maintain control through the exploitation of members' feelings of unworthiness. The children of Elizabeth Clare Prophet do not keep the faith, and son Sean remarks that the church of his youth "reeked of fundamentalism" and imposed "near-Taliban style restrictions on dress and human interaction" (McMillion 2005a).

What will happen now that the way has been found half mad? Although many sect members have left, hundreds remain and pay large sums to lease church land for home sites, to be fully accepted, and to receive space in the community bomb shelters. What new myths will be created, what future apocalyptic landscape represented, to hold the tithe-based sect together when the recent infusion of capital runs out (McMillion 2001, 2003)? Will the CUT dissipate with defections, dissolve in a banality of lawsuits seeking financial remedies for bilked members, or explode in a violent power struggle for control? Until her mental defects became public, Prophet appeared increasingly intoxicated by the power of her position. An eerie focus on her own divinity coincided with the end of her fourth marriage and the abandonment of the church by her four children. And now she is left with a contracting empire built on an expensive foundation of false prophecies. Will she go quietly into that long goodnight, or will an ardent inner circle deify her name, manifest a new external threat, and direct the church toward a resurgence of arms?

When holy leadership is threatened there can be hell to pay. Jim Jones, David Koresh, and Joseph Kibwetere remind us of the deadly endgame that can await cult members. The CUT's ideology has long exhibited a troubling nostalgia for the future. For much of its existence, the church was building a staging station in Montana, preparing to expand into a depopulated American landscape scorched pure by the cleansing fire of nuclear fission. Several years ago the conversion of their ranch into a system of bomb shelters and a history of accumulating weapons caches led Cynthia Kissler of the Cult Awareness Network to characterize the CUT as "the largest survivalist and paramilitary group that we're aware of" (LE 1993a; McMillion 2005a). What is the truth now? It is easy to be misled. Wariness urges a finding of

fear. Field experience reminds us that most CUT members are extremely decent, peaceful people vowing to carry on. But a long shadow is cast by the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God and other cases, a grim specter of leaders descending into mental pathology and directing vulnerable, dependent people to perform or succumb to heinous acts. In this, the CUT remains unrevealed.

PERFECTABILITY

Striving after perfection is eminently part of geographical idealism; the utopian urge is infused with all the admirable and deplorable traits of our kind. Not many geographers are actively involved with "perfectability," but in our internal literature is a great deal of questioning scrutiny of Amish, Mennonite, Davidian, Native American, New Age, and self-involved "Americanist" thought and action, which suggests at the least an ongoing concern with how others live and whether we could live better. Many of humanity's most elegant and vital spiritual and intellectual truths are born of this process. Yet, interwoven like paralleling and insinuating strands of rope, are recurrent, mystifying, and maybe edifying cases such as the Church Universal and Triumphant.

The plain lesson is that even our noble wish for paradisiacal geographical salvation is not immune to somatic mental illness and epic falls from ethical grace. It seems clear that distinguishing utopia from dystopia will remain an elemental part of the defining and redefining of what it means to be a human being (Walsh 1962). All such seekers merit watching as fabricators of geography, as reminders of the utopian quest, as potential vectors for dystopian catastrophe. Some sects prove ferocious; others appear so, only to retreat into edgy quiescence. The outcome remains difficult to predict. There is something strangely volcanic about it all: multilayered, pressurized, eruptively dangerous. In the end, the final arbiter between utopia and dystopia may be found in the terrible mathematics of the body count.

NOTES

1. John Kirtland Wright, for forty years a pivotal figure in the American Geographical Society and author of the most intellectual yet intelligible presidential address to the Association of American Geographers (1947), was also the brother of Austin Tappan Wright, who composed arguably the best designed of all literary utopias, *Islandia*, published in 1942. It was John who drafted the maps for the published book, and the brothers' relationship is spelled out, in part, in a 1976 essay by Philip Porter and Fred Lukermann. The larger geography of these ventures was mapped, interestingly, by Ronald Abler in "The Geography of Nowhere," a work noted in Porter and Lukermann (1976, 218), and matched in part by J. M. Powell in a 1971 article. The concentration of distinguished senior geographers about these ideas and themes is clear.

2. Indeed, the whole "safety-valve" argument employed by some of the Turnerian historians of the American West, which argues that open land provided a constantly moving frontier, was turned on its head and elegantly recast by Walter Prescott Webb in *The Great Frontier* (1952) and commented on with remarkable acuity by D. W. Meinig (1960) at an Association of American Geographers session in honor of Webb (Webb 1960).

3. The Society for Utopian Studies has its own home on the World Wide Web, [www.utoronto.ca/utopia/about.html], as well as a scholarly journal and an H-Net listserv for those who wish to follow up these and other leads; the literature from many a discipline relating to utopianism is dense upon the shelves.

4. “Fragility” can be a matter of judgment. The bhagwan’s efforts at Rajneeshpuram were affected in part by his ethereal otherworldliness, as the principal behind the venture, but it was also influenced—and assuredly so—by the crass worldliness of his assistants, including spokesperson Ma Anand Sheela (formerly of Montclair, New Jersey), who has the dubious distinction of having—twice—had her microphone switched off by Ted Koppel, on *Nightline*, for spouting obscenities on that late-night paragon of “family television.”

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