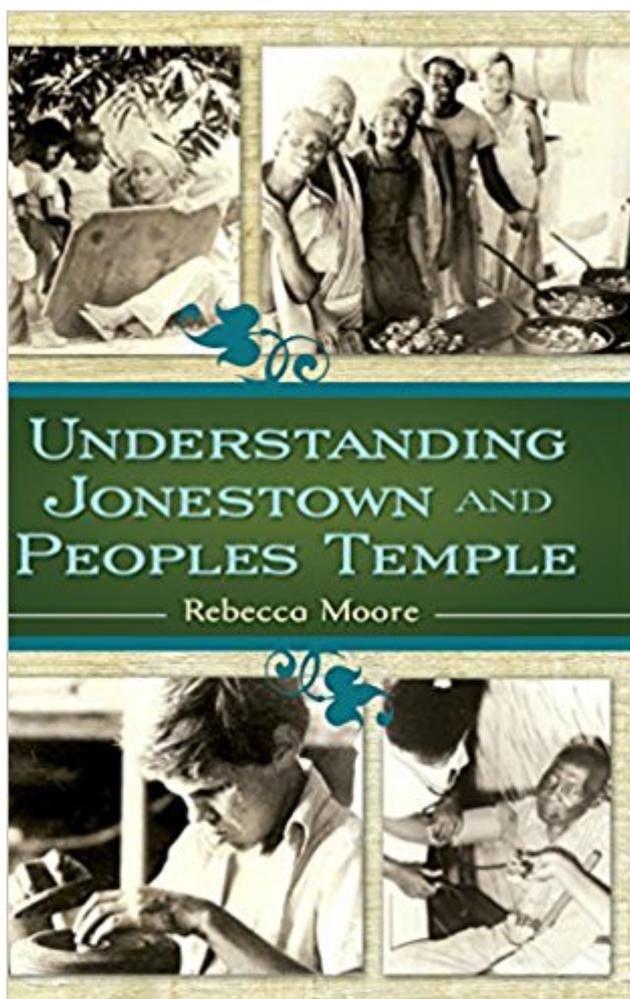


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Understanding Jonestown And Peoples Temple



Synopsis

Most people understand Peoples Temple through its violent end in Jonestown, Guyana in 1978, where more than 900 Americans committed murder and suicide in a jungle commune. Media coverage of the event sensationalized the group and obscured the background of those who died. The view that emerged thirty years ago continues to dominate understanding of Jonestown today, despite dozens of books, articles, and documentaries that have appeared. This book provides a fresh perspective on Peoples Temple and Jonestown, locating the group within the context of religion in America and offering a contemporary history that corrects the inaccuracies often associated with the group and its demise. Although Peoples Temple has some of the characteristics many associate with cults, it also shares many characteristics of Black Religion in America. Moreover, it is crucial to understand the organization within the social and political movements of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Race, class, colonialism, gender, and other issues dominated the times, and so dominated the consciousness of the members of Peoples Temple. Here, Moore, who lost three family members in the events in Guyana, offers a framework of U.S. social, cultural, and political history that helps readers better understand Peoples Temple and its members.

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Customer Reviews

This book is useful in terms of understanding the subject matter for all the wrong reasons. Rebecca Moore, the author, had two sisters die at Jonestown and is a professor of religious studies. Her sisters were in high leadership positions at Jonestown. For her own reasons, she has become the academic defender of the legacy of the Peoples Temple. Unintentionally, the book is useful for

understanding the mentality of the movement and its followers. It is written from a sympathetic perspective. The author seems sometimes motivated by a sort of paranoid dualism. That Peoples Temple was somehow the victim of some sort of anti-cult conspiracy that was equal to whatever evils existed within the Peoples Temple. Her religious ideas are odd to say the least. In her world, those who are critical of a religious group or who leave a religious group are "apostates". She sees them implicitly as people who are not to be trusted especially in terms of any civil or legal disputes with their former group. She almost promotes the idea of a group legal right to "exclusion" or "excommunication" in which those banished from a group cannot appeal to civil society. Her use of the word "apostate" is especially strange especially given her academic position. To be an "apostate" is to deny a belief. But many of those who left the Peoples Temple did not necessarily deny its beliefs. The logic that says that a belief is dependent on being a member in good standing of an organization is inevitably biased in the organization's favor. By using the word as she does, she is implicitly making the argument that "belief" is equal to obedience.

The seasoned student of Peoples Temple may already be familiar with some of the primary source material in this new book by Rebecca Moore. However, more than just retelling the story of Peoples Temple through the primary sources, Dr. Moore offers something not seen before in a book about the Temple - an invitation to look at the sources the way a scholar would. This means that the book is both an introduction to Peoples Temple as an object of study and an introduction to the scholarly field of religious studies. This is primarily by way of example, but in the introduction "Framing the Subject", Dr. Moore addresses the conditions for the production of a large part of the body of knowledge of Peoples Temple: that much of the press coverage and the first books about the Temple were based on information of defectors (because the vast majority of the community had perished in Jonestown) and thus were quite biased. Dr. Moore also underlines the importance of being critical of our own language because the language we use to describe the object of study guides what we look at and therefore shapes what we learn. The introduction in other words provides the reader with tools to evaluate information about Peoples Temple and to be critical of the way we construct Peoples Temple in our research - tools that Dr. Moore herself applies throughout the book. The book is comprised of an introduction (as described above), and nine chapters. Chapter 1 provides a short biography of Jim Jones, chapter 2 and 3 outlines the history of the organization, including the change in focus from religion to political goals, and the early history of Jonestown. Chapter 4 analyzes the opposition against the Temple: defectors, the Concerned Relatives, the media and different government agencies.

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