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# “A New Condition of Being a New Man”: Cargo Movements, Father Divine, and Postcolonial Discourse\*

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In recent years it has become fashionable among scholars in the human and social sciences to invoke the interpretive category of *post-colonial* in their work. The term itself is multifarious, but in general points to an increasing desire to reconfigure our understandings of identity and culture in the light of the colonial experience. There is widespread consensus among scholars of postcolonialism in most fields that although colonialism was transacted at a global level, its effects were local; and, consequently, that any coherent theory of the nature of both individual and social bodies in modernity must begin with a focus on the specific. The question that ultimately confronts this scholarship is, as Ania Loomba recently pointed out, “How do we weave together the general and the particular?” (1998, xiv, xvi, 249; see also Chidester 2000, 424). Comparative studies in religion are well situated to confront this question, and in the proceeding discussion I shall focus on two particular religious phenomena—Melanesian cargo cults and the Peace Mission of Father Divine—as localized movements whose similarities provide an entrée into the construction of a more general theory of cultural creativity in the modern period.

Cargo movements are a religious phenomenon that emerged in Melanesia in the wake of colonial contact at the end of the nineteenth century (see Burridge 1960, 1969; Cochrane 1970; Guiart 1951; Jarvie

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1963, 1967; Long 1999; Worsley 1968). The name was ascribed to a collective of movements due to the fact that the acquisition of Western commodities featured predominantly in their mythic and ritualistic structures, alongside a redefinition of time, and communal, ancestral, and colonial power relations. Within their mythic frameworks, the ancestral and mythic past were reconfigured in relation to the historical experience of colonization, ultimately pointing to an entirely new mode of human and cultural definition that was neither Papua-New Guinean nor Western (Long 1999, 135). The Peace Mission movement was born half a world away in Harlem in the early 1930s, under the leadership of Father Divine (see Harris 1953; Watts 1992; Weisbrot 1983). To his disciples, Divine was God; and through their relationship with him, they collectively anticipated a present-centred form of salvation that involved a restructuring of power relations in the United States, particularly in respect to economics and ethnicity.

At first glance, the movements appear obviously far-removed from one another in terms of both geographical location, and historical and cultural milieu. Yet there are fundamental correspondences between them that are, at the very least, intriguing. More than this, however, the importance of certain correspondences that they share—cultural contact, domination, the valuation of commodities, for instance—suggests a portal through which a postcolonial theory may be framed.

Before proceeding further, a word is necessary in respect to the term *postcolonial*. In a broad sense, the period in which we find ourselves has been designated postcolonial in reference to the historical and global dismantling of direct colonial control, specifically in political and economic terms. The term is also applied to the growing academic field of inquiry already referred to above. Postcolonial studies, according to Peter Hulme, is an attempt to intellectually disengage from the “whole colonial syndrome” (1995, 120) or, as Loomba suggests, to re-examine the “universalist pretensions of Western knowledge systems” (1998, 247). More recently, David Chidester has suggested that the field has begun to shift its attention away from this focus on critique toward the task of exploring modes of “subjectivity and agency” within colonized communities (2000, 432). It is in this shift in focus that another related meaning of the term *postcolonial* can be discerned, referring to re-

flections and various forms of discourses on the meaning of the colonial enterprise. In this sense postcolonial ideas, languages, and actions are not necessarily posterior to colonialism, but can, and have, existed concomitantly with the experience of being colonized. From this perspective, postcolonial discourse has occurred quite apart from postcolonial studies, and is not predicated on Western epistemological dilemmas. That said, these discourses nonetheless have serious implications for Western categories of knowing the human, as I shall now suggest in relation to the study of religion.

### Cargo Movements

Anthropologists and scholars of religion have been talking about cargo cults for almost a century, and the work of scholars such as Ian Jarvie, Kennelm BurrIDGE, and Peter Worsley have variously directed attention to a number of critical features common to all these Melanesian movements. To begin, they have generally taken place in regions of Papua-New Guinea that have been colonized and where there has been subsequent economic disparity (see Jarvie 1967, 66). The presence of Western forms of wealth in this context come to be associated with social status and, from the perspective of the colonized, both the wealth and status were unattainable. BurrIDGE described this discrepancy in frankly religious language, suggesting that the Melanesians had “no access to the kind of redemption the [new] shared aspirations and values imply”; and Jarvie believed that this situation impressed upon those who were colonized a perception of both their own economic deficiency as well as the impossibility of gaining recognition as legitimate members of their altered society (BurrIDGE 1969, 97; Jarvie 1967, 66). For the Elema of Papua, for instance, this was articulated in a striking manner and in terms that drew upon an established social category called *rubbish men*. Rubbish men were those who were traditionally denied privileges shared by most men, due to their inability to function usefully in society; and in the colonial situation, the inability to acquire European wealth led to a generalized sense of being regarded by Europeans as an entire society of rubbish men (Cochrane 1970, 11, 137).<sup>1</sup>

It is from this context that cargo cults and their prophets repeatedly emerged in Papua-New Guinea. In all cases, cult prophets enjoyed no recognizable status in their society prior to emerging as religious leaders. Each received revelations containing a vision of new ways of defining the human—"a new condition of being a new man"—and proceeded to make critical motions toward its realization. Successful transmission of these visions rested in the first instance on the prophets' magnetic personalities, toward which followers with varying aspirations were drawn. The visions themselves were mystical, but they contained clearly political and economic content. They were also millenarian and encompassed forms of redemption that were historically bound by the structures that simultaneously defined the values of the dominant culture and denied Melanesians access to that form of definition (Jarvie 1967, 64; Burridge 1969, 97, 111, 112). As Jarvie noted, what was anticipated in all instances was a "material heaven on earth" in which manufactured goods associated with Western wealth figure predominantly. The goods themselves did not possess any intrinsic value, but were related to a collective aspiration for participation in an altered structure of human and social significance. The colonized Papua-New Guineans anticipated that the acquisition of goods (goods that they felt had thus far been hoarded by whites) would permit them access to a material structure in relation to which whites appeared to define the significance of a human being (Jarvie 1979, 66; Cochrane 1970, 64, 66).<sup>2</sup> Cargo, then, had to do fundamentally with a re-ordering of power.

In all cases, the *myth-dreams* that compelled prophets toward this end harkened to primal mythologies that accounted for social structures and individual responsibilities prior to colonization. In the first instance, the presence of Westerners had created a disruption in these primal mythologies; but the mythic past could not, obviously, be rejected without forcing these cultures into further disequilibrium. In the midst of this contingent situation, the prophets discovered through revelatory dreams, modes of creating new meanings of the human that could reconcile both the "mythic past" and the historical reality of contact (Long 1999, 129; Burridge 1960, 154). The new myths pointed to political and economic changes, such that the dreams that success-

fully gave rise to cargo cults were those that contained mandates for action that would ultimately result in freedom from domination or, more specifically, from the abbreviated human engendered by domination.<sup>3</sup> Essentially, cargo dreams defined the modes by which Western categories of human valuation—or cargo—could be reconciled with those of the pre-contact situation. To this end, cult prophets initiated collective activity believed to be conducive to the arrival of cargo, including American-style military camps, construction of warehouses and prototypical villages, English-language teaching, collective confessions, slaughter of chickens and pigs, or the requirement of celibacy (see Jarvie 1963; Guiart 1951, 85). Additionally, cargo cultists collectively tended to undergo various sorts of ecstatic experience. To the extent that myth-dreams provided images of transformation required by the social body, ecstatic dance and movement might be regarded as modes of activating this transformation within the individual body. As such, these represent the individual's movement toward a "new condition of being a new man." We might add that anthropologists have generally agreed that the measure of a prophet's success is the continued allegiance of his followers and that this allegiance is a result of his ability to secure the arrival of cargo (Cochrane 1970, 66).

The experience of colonial contact has consistently had a disruptive impact upon pre-contact traditions and arenas of human meaning of the colonized. Cargo movements constitute an attempt to religiously confront the mythic and social discontinuities created by colonial contact—to revalue the material structures of the West in order to arrive at some understanding of the human that accounts for both the mythic past and the historical fact of domination. As Charles Long has notes, "they provide a unique and alternate meaning of human freedom in the modern world" (Long 1999, 103). Colonial domination entails sudden estrangement from new resources of power and status; and within this context, cargo cults and their prophets envisioned new meanings of these resources in order to re-order structures of historical and ontological power. Essentially the relationships between the human being, the larger society, and the cosmos were reconsidered in order to suggest a mode by which "new men may be made" (Burrige 1960, xvi-xvii; 1969, 143).

As cargo cults seek to expand the attenuated structures of human meaning attendant colonialism, these phenomena also invite a serious reconsideration of how religion is to be studied in a postcolonial situation. They provide us with an opportunity to speculate on the religious meaning of modernity, as they offer a comprehensive interpretation of human religiosity bound by the peculiar character of modernity: they take place within a colonial setting that entails domination; they are an interpretation of the modern period from the perspective of the colonized; and they are an interpretation in which manufactured goods (which have defined the colonial period) figure centrally.<sup>4</sup> For such a project of reconfiguration to be legitimate, however, this commentary on the meaning of modernity must be discerned beyond the particular phenomenon of cargo movements. With this in mind, we turn now to the Peace Mission movement and Depression era Harlem, where there are striking reverberations of cargoism in terms of defining context, prophetic leadership, mythic structure, and postcolonial interpretation.

### The Peace Mission

Harlem of the 1920s and 1930s was among the more graphic arenas of social and economic disequilibrium in the United States; and within this context of social disparity, a man who claimed he was God and preached a present-centred form of redemption through economic prosperity, came to elicit the devotion of thousands of Americans. Similarities between Father Divine and his Peace Mission, and cargo movements generally, are conspicuous.

The movement, for instance, emerged from an economic and social situation not unlike that of colonial New Guinea. Harlem of the 1930's was clearly economically underdeveloped. The tuberculosis rate within the ghetto was four times that of New York City as a whole; blacks suffered from syphilis at rates recorded as seven times higher than those of whites; two African American women died in childbirth for every one of their white counterparts. Residents of Harlem were forced to pay up to fifty percent of their incomes for accommodation while whites outside the ghetto generally paid only twenty to twenty-five percent (see Harris 1953, 51). Life in Harlem and the knowledge

that white America did not by and large live within similar physical and psychological constraints were inescapable realities for its residents. In her 1953 book on Father Divine, Sarah Harris reflected on the factors that contributed to the Peace Mission's appeal:

They say that they knew that they could not live in the same houses as white people lived and did not expect to live in those houses. They knew that they could not attend the same schools as white people attended and did not expect to be allowed to attend those schools. They knew they could not hold the same jobs as white people held and did not expect to hold those jobs. Therein, they tell today, lay the tragedy of their frustrations—not in what they did not have but rather in what they could not expect. It was not the reality of their lives that was so unbearable. It was the hopelessness behind the reality. (Harris 1953, 25)

The “tragedy of their frustrations” lay in their exclusion from dominant arenas of cultural valuation so that, like the Elema, they felt that they were regarded as little more than “rubbish” in the eyes of the dominant white America. As Beautiful Faith, a devoted follower of Father Divine, explained, “Father gave me my first chance to be somebody ... All my life I didn't amount to nothing—just cooking and cleaning for the white folks” (Weisbrot 1983, 60).

Like the cargo cult prophet, Father Divine was a man with no particular status prior to receiving his revelation. Although his early years are relatively obscure, it is likely that he was born George Baker in Rockville, Maryland in 1879. It is only in 1899 that George Baker can be definitely situated as a gardener who was working in Baltimore; and as late as 1915, he was as yet a relatively insignificant religious figure in New York City. He did, nonetheless, receive a series of revelations that propelled him to prominence. While in Baltimore, he was repulsed by the sight of African Americans singing spirituals and begging door to door, a phenomenon that he later said, was “not according to the life and teachings of Christ” (Watts 1992, 5, 14; Weisbrot 1983, 16-19). Even at this early point, George Baker had come to believe that the divine could not contain the meaning of begging.

His precise understanding of God was to take a more structured form during the decade that followed and in the wake of his relation-

ship with two black preachers. The first was Samuel Morris, a man who, it is said, "... had a special talent for provoking congregations to expel him bodily from their church services, by attempting to enlighten them as to his divinity, at the most inopportune moments." Baker became Morris' disciple and was ascribed a central role in his mentor's hierarchy of power. Morris, who referred to himself as "Father Jehovah," regarded his own role as that of "God in the Fathership degree;" and Baker, who he referred to as his "Messenger," held "a similar status in the Sonship degree." The second preacher who influenced Baker during this period was John A. Hickerson (or "Reverend Saint John The Vine," as he preferred to be called<sup>5</sup>) who joined Baker as Morris' disciple for a short time. In 1912, following disagreements over Morris' claim to a greater measure of sanctity than his followers, the association disintegrated; and Divine headed South for about three years, carrying with him a decidedly personal view of the location of God's spirit on earth (Weisbrot 1983, 16-21, 24; Watts 1992, 27, 30-32).

During the years that followed, George Baker's name underwent a number of modifications. By a process reminiscent of the evolution of cargo cult prophet's self-understanding, he came to an awareness of himself as being "at one with the source of all power which the members of the wider society [were] taken to acknowledge" (Burridge 1969, 107).<sup>6</sup> George Baker discerned a dual locus for this power: God and America's Constitutional structures; and he increasingly identified with these so that, by the 1930s, he had come to understand himself to be very nearly an embodiment of each. As early as 1914, when he was arrested in Valdosta, Georgia on charges of insanity and public nuisance, "George Baker" was fading and had been replaced by a man whose name appeared on the writ as "John Doe, alias God." Within fifteen years, the alias had become a reality. The former John Doe, who had become respectively "John Devine" and finally "John Divine" (Weisbrot 1983, 20, 27) was informing his followers,

[the kingdom of God] is a state of consciousness of [sic] which we may all be free. I have limitless blessings to bestow upon mankind, spiritual, mental, material and social. All that is necessary is the understanding of the spirit of the consciousness of the presence or God. I have healing for you all. It is not necessary to contact me



I have healing for you all. It is not necessary to contact me personally. It is necessary to be spiritually attuned to this consciousness of the presence of God made manifest through me. (Weisbrot 1983, 50)

With or without the Personal Presence, I will rule millions of homes and houses, for I AM DIVINE, and that is not merely a word, it is a Power. (Watts 1992, 72)

There is no doubt that he believed this presence to be, indeed, very powerful. In 1932, he was found guilty of "menace" by a Suffolk County Court, a conviction that was later overturned by the New York State Supreme Court. According to Robert Weisbrot, when the presiding judge rather mysteriously dropped dead three days later, Divine expressed his regret from his jail cell in unambiguous terms, saying, "I hated to do it." Jill Watts, arguing that Divine said nothing until his release from jail two weeks following Justice Lewis J. Smith's death, suggests that the prophet was less forceful; he was, nonetheless, clear in implicating himself in the man's demise: "I did not desire Judge Smith to die ... I did desire that MY spirit would touch his heart and change his mind that he might repent and believe and be saved from the grave" (Weisbrot 1983, 53-54; Watts 1992, 100).

The Constitutional spirit of America also appeared to manifest itself through Father Divine. In addressing his followers, once again the line between the man and the source of power became obscured, as on one occasion when he told them: "Our representatives need a higher degree. I desire to give our representatives a new birth of freedom, under God, so that they might represent one nation, indivisible with liberty and justice for all. This is my work and my mission" (Harris 1953, 27).

George Baker, who came to regard himself as in some sense embodying both God and America's Constitutional spirit, expressed a new vision of humanity in which every human being was possessed of God's spirit and consequently deserving of dignified treatment in the forms of respectable work and housing. Like the cargo cult prophet, he "envisioned a new condition" of being an American. The appeal of this vision was reinforced by a form of personal appeal that resulted in an astonishing level of devotion on the part of his followers. Spirituals

that focused on Divine were regularly composed at communal feasts, and in most cases the name of God or of the Saviour of traditional spirituals were replaced by references to “Father”:

Just give me my sweet Father Divine,  
 Just give me my sweet Father Divine,  
 You may have all the world,  
 With the pleasure it gives;  
 But give me sweet Father Divine. (Weisbrot 1983, 85)<sup>7</sup>

Weisbrot and Harris have claimed that ecstatic experiences (labelled “vibrating” by Harris) by followers enraptured by Divine were also customary occurrences at these gatherings; and these they variously described as “sublime climax[es] of fulfillment,” “a tremendous way in which followers, men as well as women, [could] display their love for God,” “frenzied behaviors,” and orgasmic. Although Watts takes issue with Harris’ contention that Father Divine elicited sexual—at times orgasmic—responses from female followers, she nonetheless does refer to ecstatic states brought on by their devotion to Divine. His banquets are described as “passionate celebrations ... that could be physically and emotionally draining,” and “... intoxicating spiritual encounters” at which followers shouted, danced, and spoke in tongues (Harris 1953, 114; Weisbrot 1983, 86; Watts 1992, 37, 64, 75).<sup>8</sup>

The millenarian vision that Divine shared with these men and women also resonated with those of cargo cult prophets, as it spoke of redemption firmly situated within America of the 1920s and 1930s. He told his followers that they were not only entitled to lead lives free of poverty and social inequality, but that they were witnessing the genesis of a new society based upon principles of equality and freedom. In other words, they no longer had to focus on future salvation since it was to be realized within their own historical space and time. The new society that he envisioned was one in which hunger, unemployment, and homelessness rooted in ethnic delineations were to be eradicated, while the opportunities for economic, social, and political prosperity were to be afforded every human being. Divine maintained that economic prosperity was the mode by which this new vision could be realized. He also understood that affluence had become inextricably

woven into the larger society's manner of establishing the worth of an American; and so, for instance, his disciples were urged to look toward corporate giants such as Henry Ford as role models (Weisbrot 1983, 45, 87, 199).<sup>9</sup> However tangible the content of this vision, Divine nonetheless articulated it in mystical terms: "Out of all the higher education, it does not profit until you get away from racism. Until you get away from a race or colour, our representatives need a higher degree. I desire to give our representatives [this degree]" (Harris 1953, 27).

The notion of a re-ordering of power (which African American prosperity would signify) emanated from what could well be termed Father Divine's own myth-dream. This dream was firmly entrenched in both America's mythic past as well as the historical reality of the early 20th century, and it posed a meaning of the human that sought to reconcile one with the other. Weisbrot suggests that for Divine, America's primal mythology could be located within the nation's founding documents—the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution—as well as within Christianity. It has been said that "the United States was his homeland and the source of his social and cultural heritage. It was also, for a man who read Jefferson seriously, a birthright to freedom and fair opportunity." Clearly however, this birthright had been subverted, as a substantial proportion of the nation's citizens had been denied access to this meaning of freedom; and many black separatists of the period recognized that Christianity had, at least in part, contributed to this oppression (Weisbrot 1983, 196).<sup>10</sup> Divine felt that a critical rupture had occurred in America's primal mythology as dominant segments of society had chosen to treat their founding documents as "nothing but a mockery." However, this realization did not lead the prophet to a rejection of the meanings of freedom articulated within either the Constitution or American Christianity, but gave rise to a dream of America within which those meanings could be realized. After all, Divine maintained, the perpetuation of injustice was "not as much the government's fault as it is the fault of the people themselves." His was a vision woven from the threads of democracy, Christian faith, and freedom; and within which, he said, every American might be rendered "independent in Christ according to the Constitution" (Weisbrot 1983, 198, 200, 203-204). In contrast to

some of his contemporaries,<sup>11</sup> Divine had a profound belief in America and its potential for containing his new meaning for its people: "I have searched this planet through and through and around and around the United States of America is the only place I have found that has the fundamental principle wherein the Kingdom of God can be legitimately established if lived up to" (Watts 1992, 101).

The articulation of Father Divine's redemptive myth was critical in terms of attracting followers. Yet the myth-dream was primarily politically and economically creative; so that although it emerged from a vision, it came, in the course of time, to be sustained by constructive activity. Father Divine regarded particular forms of organized activity as essential to the realization of his vision of a new America; primary among which was communal housing, as this was the means by which all other Mission activity could be activated. As early as 1915, he purchased a home in Brooklyn where he and his small group of followers combined whatever income they had (Divine managed to secure employment of some sort for most of these) and by living austere, increased their assets sufficiently to purchase a more impressive dwelling in the white middle-class community of Sayville, Long Island four years later. The Brooklyn home was the first in a series of communal residences that were created under Divine's leadership over the course of the next three decades and which, after 1932, would come to be known collectively as the Peace Mission (Weisbrot 1983, 26-27, 55). Farming communes were also established throughout New York state in an attempt to extricate Divine's followers from the stifling physical and economic conditions of the ghetto. Beginning in 1919, and continuing well through the 1930s, the prophet sponsored weekly feasts that were open to the public and free of charge, and at which the corporally or spiritually hungry (as well as those who were simply curious) were provided with meals rivaling those served within the wealthiest of sectors during the Depression:

There were large silver consoles heaped with choice fruits found only in high-grade markets. Twelve coffee percolators were within easy reach of Father Divine, who poured it into cups that waitresses then served to the guests. Large roasts, chickens, and ducks all were of excellent quality and prepared in an obviously professional manner. The

finest vegetables accompanied the dishes. It was a repast without end  
... (Weisbrot 1983, 35; see also Watts 1992, 63)

Divine's banquets served a number of ends, not the least of which was that they encouraged guests whose everyday lives were lived on the fringes of American society to conceive of themselves as significant members of a more salient community.

The meals were also part of Divine's larger policy of formally educating his followers. Political figures were invited to speak at these weekly gatherings called "Weekly Government Forums," and routinely informed disciples and guests as to the general dynamics of the American political system as well as to the nature of contemporary political affairs. Since Divine regarded education as a principle means by which his vision of America could be realized, education was not a matter restricted to the Sunday feasts. He also encouraged his followers to exploit the public school system and their response was overwhelming. In 1935, for instance, there were eight thousand students registered in New York City night schools and sixteen hundred of these were Peace Mission members (a number that astonished the administration) (Watts 1992, 132, 136; Weisbrot 1983, 96, 171). Peace Mission private schools were also established in upper New York state, and their curriculum focused specifically on the teaching of Americanism and government; rote memorization of America's founding documents was required of every student registered in these schools (Harris 1953, 203).

While education was not mandatory for Father Divine's disciples, rules that enforced a particular style of life within his centres applied to everyone. Smoking, swearing, and consumption of alcohol were strictly prohibited, and violations resulted in dismissal from Mission centres. Sexual activity of any sort was the gravest possible offense. Harris suggested that this ordinance may have been a result of Divine's idiosyncratic desire to maintain his disciples' complete devotion, but this seems unlikely. Watts more convincingly contends that Father Divine believed that sexual activity consumed individuals' "spiritual energy" necessary for warding off illness and death (Weisbrot 1983, 72; Harris 1953, 97; Watts 1992, 66). It could be argued, however,

that celibacy had a much more practical purpose, and had to do with Divine's vision of a nation freed of the obstacles that prevented African Americans from sharing in their society's economic and social constructs of status and human meaning.

Sexuality was clearly such an obstruction within the context of the ghetto and equally within white perceptions of African America. Divine's disdain for marriages was obvious; he regarded the institution as little better than "white slavery." He recognized the fact that for a substantial number of urban poor who responded to the allure of his Mission, sexuality constituted a barrier to economic stability and independence. A woman named Miss Beautiful, for instance, had been born in a southern cotton field of a woman who had four other children and whose husband had disappeared prior to the birth of the fifth. Miss Beautiful had married at fourteen years of age and had become a grandmother by the time she was thirty-two. Until she encountered Father Divine and his Peace Mission, her life's experience had been only of abject poverty within which sexuality had played a central role. Yet it was not only women who were confined by their expressed sexuality. During the Depression, employment opportunities were scarcer for black men than for women, and consequently many men were unable to support their wives and children. The frustration and resentment to which this gave rise, was succinctly expressed by one Mission member, Daniel in the Lion's Den: "I was a terrible mean man. I liked bein' mean to womin then. And I drink a lot of liquor, all I can get my hands on. And them womins pays. I make womins pay for everything they done to me" (Harris 1953, 25, 98). Celibacy in the context of a world that bore many Miss Beautifuls and Daniels was a structured means by which the sources of poverty might be constructively confronted.

Celibacy also proffered a certain survival value for a religious movement that not only espoused the notion of racial equality but also realized this ideal within the walls of its centres. It has been argued that interracial sexuality constituted one of white America's greatest fears during the period;<sup>12</sup> and if Divine had permitted his disciples to enter into sexual relationships with one another the Mission would certainly have provoked the censure of this sector. Indeed, despite the

ban on sexuality, Father Divine managed to repeatedly become the object of this fear of interracial mixing. While living in Sayville, for instance, his neighbours were so enraged by the discovery that a white woman by the name of Julia Arras (who had formerly worked as a governess in the home of a state representative) had joined the Mission that they laid charges against Divine. Among the accusations that brought him to trial was that of having disturbed the peace by "conducting so-called religious services, at which services colored and white people did congregate and mingle together in large numbers..." (Weisbrot 1983, 48-51). Clearly, if Divine had not strictly enforced celibacy, the charges and convictions would have been more ponderous and quite possibly more devastating for the Peace Mission.

Whether we consider the ardent discipline imposed by Father Divine upon his followers, his Sunday feasts, communal centres and farming communities, his emphasis on education that focused on Americanism, or his strict prohibition of sexual relationships, it is clear that the communal activity he generated was aimed specifically at creating a context in which poverty would be alleviated, racial distinctions could be eradicated, and his new meaning of America could emerge. It was, in this sense, much like the activity generated by the cargo cult prophet.

Turning finally to the measure of Divine's success, the question to consider is whether or not he was able to realize his dream; whether, in Melanesian terms, he secured the arrival of "cargo." To be sure, Father Divine did not attract substantial numbers of new followers from the late 1940s onward, a fact that appears to have resulted from the aging prophet's decision to turn his attention toward consolidating his institution and away from his focus on reform (Weisbrot 1983, 219). Yet he clearly maintained the devotion of those disciples who had joined him during the 1920s and 1930s; and their loyalty had been won through his ability to secure the material content of the myth-dream that had initially attracted them to the Peace Mission. They had faith in the prophet, as well as his capacity to bring about a new America within which all citizens, regardless of ethnicity, enjoyed access to material prosperity and to acknowledgment of their significance as full human beings.

In the first instances, this translated into adequate food, steady jobs, and decent living conditions; yet, as the Depression unfolded, the Mission itself came to embody many of the most ambitious promises inherent in Divine's myth-dream. Peace Mission businesses flourished throughout the 1920s because they dealt in low cost commodities and because the communal living style of the prophet's followers allowed them to cut their margins of profit sufficiently to undercut market prices. By the early 1930s the level of success enjoyed by these small businesses warranted the creation of bureaucratic structures capable of controlling what was to become a multi-million dollar enterprise. Financial assets aside, the demography of the Mission itself was a testament to ethnic (as well as social) plurality. By the end of the 1930s, there were at least one hundred and fifty Mission centres in existence. In the states of New York and New Jersey, African Americans constituted eighty-five to ninety percent of Divine's disciples; yet in states west of these they often constituted substantially less than thirty percent. Women accounted for at least three-quarters of membership; and an elderly and West Indian immigrant presence was notable (Weisbrot 1983, 59-61, 74-75).

Economic success, as well as this demographic range of Mission centres propelled Divine to acknowledgment as a national figure.<sup>13</sup> This prophet demonstrated that it was possible for a poor black man to create a million-dollar enterprise that allowed thousands of marginalized Americans to live more comfortably than they could have otherwise hoped. Ultimately, Father Divine confirmed the fact that it was possible for America to contain the meaning of itself that he and his followers collectively dreamed. As one disciple declared, "This is heaven on earth" (Weisbrot 1983, 86).

## Conclusion

In a number of critical respects, cargo movements and the Peace Mission were mutually engaged in a specific discourse about religion and modernity. To use the terminology of postcolonial studies, both Papua-New Guinea and Depression era Harlem were "contact zones," "frontier zones," or "in-between" spaces: those sites that are a matrix of



reciprocities, in the context of which identities and cultures are constructed (Pratt 1992; Chidester 1996 255-256; Chidester 2000, xv, 424; Bhabha 1994, 39; Loomba 1998, 232, 241). Charles H. Long has suggested that religion is the mode by which “one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one’s place in the world” (Long 1999, 7).<sup>14</sup> This *ultimate* form of orientation is precisely what is at stake within the context of “contact zones” such as those that have been considered here. Within these spaces, identities and societies are constructed and defined in relation to human composition, power differentials, and cosmic forces; and figuring predominantly within the negotiation of these relationships are structures of materiality—cargo.

Traditionally, the study of religion has afforded little attention to the relationship between the religious imagination and materiality;<sup>15</sup> and, in the modern era specifically, the significance of commodities has been all but disregarded. The postcolonial discourse of both movements considered in this essay point quite clearly to the fact that both the exchange and the control of commodities have been undeniably implicated in the construction and deconstruction of human meanings throughout the modern period. These movements constitute direct religious confrontations with the impact of colonialism; and for this reason point to the necessity for the study of religion to undergo a reconsideration of its own modes of being. Otherwise, our discourses risk, as they have tended to do too often, being ambiguous and ineffectual.

The Peace Mission, for instance, has generally been regarded as an “escapist religious cult”; with Divine himself being portrayed as a conventional cult leader—content to “bask, immobile, in the adulation of his followers” (Weisbrot 1983, preface, 8; Watts 1992, x). Escapism is a religious interpretation of this phenomenon based upon a negative conceptual framework: to define the man in respect of what he is *not* presupposes a normative form of religious experience possessed by neither Divine nor his Peace Mission.

Both the Peace Mission and Melanesian cargo cults present critical data from which a more constructive postcolonial study of religion might be formulated. Within these *ultimately* creative enterprises, cultural contact, disparities of power, and commodities figure prominently

in the interpretations of identity and culture. The collision of previous conceptions of human meaning with the contingency of historical experience creates forms of cultural turbulence that must be resolved in religious terms. The new human, social, and cosmic entities that emerge from this turbulence constitute a discourse about the profound human and cultural consequences of the colonial experience and its material resources. From the vantage point of postcolonial studies, this discourse is both historically and epistemologically significant: it offers not only an alternate interpretation of modern culture, but also insight into the material structure of religious experience.

Because your god would not feed the people, I came and I am feeding them. Because your god kept such as you segregated and discriminated, I came and I am unifying all nations together. That is why I came, because I did not believe in your god. (Weisbrot 1983, 8)

—Father Divine

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Discussing the characteristics of the “Vailala Madness” of 1919, during which the Elema of the Gulf District of Papua exhibited collective behaviour later recognized as exemplary cargo cult activity, Cochrane suggests that rubbish men were men who possessed “no magical, ritual, economic, or political power. Their opinion was of no account in meetings ... These people were unable to participate in communal activities; they did not have the necessary equipment to become useful members of society. ‘Rubbish men’ did not have the same rights as other men.”

<sup>2</sup> Cochrane also notes: “They wanted the kinds of goods which in terms of their own experience they associated with the corporate wealth transactions of ‘big men’/Europeans.” Cargo, from this perspective, “had only been a means to an end. ‘Cargo’ was a way of forcing to Europeans to recognize that the Elema were men and not ‘rubbish men.’”

<sup>3</sup> Jarvie writes: “the myth of the cargo was the myth-dream made into a full explanation and a call to action ... While the myth-dream does not solve the problems, the dream provides imperatives to action ... The Mambus and the Yalis are special in that they, steeped in the myth-dream culture, and having had some contact with the white man, add their charismatic appeal to a showing of the way—the way out of the morally invidious situation.”

<sup>4</sup> Charles Long has suggested that the cargo cult “constitutes a specific type of religious experience. It is specific in its manifestations and beliefs ... specific in

its precise definition of salvation and cargo, and it is again specific because it occurs at a point of cultural contact, such contact defining a disequilibrium between the cultures involved" (Long 1999, 127).

<sup>5</sup> Weisbrot, 1983, 18, records Hickerson's name as "Reverend St. John Divine Bishop."

<sup>6</sup> Burridge is here discussing the general characteristics of what he refers to as "cult elites."

<sup>7</sup> Members of the Peace Mission referred to these spirituals as "outpourings of the spirit."

<sup>8</sup> One cannot help but notice the similarity between descriptions of these fervent expressions of devotion and Jarvie's account of "collective hysteria" associated with cargo cult activity. This "hysteria" includes "visions, dreams, swoons, fits, seizures, 'deaths', shaking fits, dancing manias, nonsense talk, and gibberish" (Jarvie 1967, 66). Peter Worsley, 1968, 247, suggested that these phenomena (which he described as "mass-possession, trances, fantasies, twitching") are not random, but are expression of the "ardent wishes and hopes poured into the movement." See also Long, 1999, 130.

<sup>9</sup> Even Andrew Carnegie, whose philanthropy was partially financed by his own "ruthless management" was described by Divine as "as high as man in mortal consciousness and on a material plane could attain."

<sup>10</sup> Wallace D. Fard, for instance, founded the Nation of Islam during the same period.

<sup>11</sup> I am thinking particularly here of Marcus Garvey who founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in 1914, through which he sought to combine African American nationalism with a movement away from America, and "back to Africa."

<sup>12</sup> Weisbrot, 1983, 107-108, discusses this general form of anxiety, noting that it was most prevalent during the period in northern cities where structurally entrenched segregation did not exist as it did in the South. He notes, "During the early thirties, when the Civilian Conservation Corps established Negro camps, the most vociferous objections hosting them came from communities outside the South, most stressing the alleged dangers of social mixing. Citizens in Thornhurst, Pennsylvania, for example, petitioned 'righteously and vigorously' that no Negro be permitted to endanger their 'unescorted women,' despite the absence of a single instance of mischief by Negroes in any CCC camp."

<sup>13</sup> Weisbrot, 1983, 189, notes: "His activities were covered in leading national journals and in the black press [and] he exchanged views on issues of race relations with prominent political figures."

<sup>14</sup> This understanding of the term *religion* as the way in which we make sense of the worlds in which we find ourselves—the means by which we negotiate the myriad boundaries we encounter in order to sustain a sense of our significance as human beings—has been put forward by others. Catherine Albanese, 1981, 5, for instance, suggest that “religion concerns the way we locate ourselves in space . . . it means staking out a claim on the landscape of identity.” From this perspective, religion is essentially the way we determine what a meaningful human being is within any particular historical context. It occurs as we confront boundaries apart from ourselves that force us then to imagine and re-imagine our meaning so as to sustain a sense of our own significance. For further discussion, see Albanese 1981, 3-9; Long 1969, 141-150; Smith 1978, 291; and Gill 1987, 153.

<sup>15</sup> In order to explore the relationship, even scholars such as Mircea Eliade (1999) and Marcel Mauss (1967) had to look to the realm of the archaic; but in so doing, allowed for the discussion to remain comfortably distant from our scholarly conversations about religion and the West.

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