

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

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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 geog-

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