

NEW JERUSALEM IN FLORIDA:
KORESHIAN COMMUNITARIANISM AND SCIENCE

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The destination of the small band of pilgrims was unknown, but their objective was not. They were searching for a home for their religious community. A place free from the meddlesome reporters of the Chicago Herald, free from lawsuits filed by unhappy husbands seeking the return of the affections and property of their wives, and, finally, a place they could practice their faith, prove their scientific theories, and establish a communitarian society. They searched for the site of the New Jerusalem from which they planned to usher in the Kingdom of God.

The group consisted of Koreshan Unity founder Cyrus Reed Teed, and the three most trusted members of his "inner court," Mrs. Annie G. Ordway, Mrs. L. M. Boomer, and Mary Mills. They left Chicago in 1893 determined to locate "the point where the vitellus of the alchemico-organic cosmos specifically determines. The position of the sign [that] marks the head of the coming dispensation and will define the location of this greatest of all cities." Each night the group sought in devotions guidance for the following day's journey. Direction came from the "Fatherhood of Being," the biune or hermaphroditic deity that Teed first summoned in 1869 and had since that year guided his activities. In January, 1894, the pilgrims reached Punta Rassa, Florida, a small settlement at the mouth of the Caloosahatchee River approximately one hundred thirty miles south of Tampa and twenty miles west of Fort Myers.¹

There the Koreshans met an elderly German settler named Gustave Damkohler, and his son Elwin, who were returning home from a Christmas visit to Fort Myers. Following a brief conversation Damkohler invited the Koreshans to his homestead along the Estero River, twenty miles down the coast. Damkohler, who had been a Florida pioneer for nearly a decade, had lost his wife in child-birth, and all but one child to the treacheries of frontier life. A man in need of companionship, the old German was particularly receptive to the pampering of the Koreshan women and the prospect of a great city rising on his property. Teed later reported that the Divine Being had orchestrated the encounter.²

The banks of the Estero River along the sparsely inhabited southwest coast of Florida seemed the ideal location for the New Jerusalem. Estero straddled potential trade routes and although accessible only to ships of shallow draught a harbor could be obtained to serve larger vessels. The Koreshans considered it potentially the "greatest commercial thoroughfare of the world," and the central distribution center for

world-wide commerce.³ The site also appeared suitable because of its isolation. Isolation could provide the Koreshans with time to train and organize members into a manageable and disciplined religious order. Fort Myers, the closest city, was a backward village, and the Fort Myers Press could not harass the utopians as did the Chicago Herald. Divine guidance notwithstanding, the Koreshans sought and found a location for their enterprise that promised seclusion and prosperity.⁴

At the center of activity was the charismatic leader of the Koreshan Unity, Cyrus Reed Teed. Teed was a product of the "Burned-Over District" in New York and a family that traced its lineage to the Reverend Jonathan Edwards and Vice President Aaron Burr. Although expected to enter the ministry, his preference for science led him to medicine. He interrupted his studies at the New York Eclectic Medical College to serve as a surgeon in the Union army from 1863 to the end of the war. Afterward he completed his education at the Thomasonian-styled medical school where he had begun his studies. From the beginning of his medical practice he preferred scientific inquiry to the humdrum routine of patient care. His search for a method of directing and regulating "human life forces," dramatically led him toward alchemy. A great breakthrough occurred in the autumn of 1869. In the midst of an experiment he discovered the philosopher's stone, turned base metal into gold, and summoned the "Fatherhood of Being" encompassed in the body of a goddess. The goddess stood before him with "golden tresses of profusely luxuriant growth" cascading over her shoulders, standing upon a silvery crescent, and grasping Mercury's Caduceus. She revealed to Teed the secrets of the cosmos and identified him as Koresh, the seventh and ultimate divine representative responsible for gathering the flock for the coming millennium.⁵

The goddess not only revealed Teed's divinity, but also disclosed knowledge of the true nature of the universe. The universe, he learned, was enclosed in a hollow earth. The sun, a great electro-magnetic battery occupied the center of the sphere, and mankind resided on the interior crust of the globe. Energy radiating from the light side of the sun reached the earth's crust where it changed from positive to negative charge and returned to the sun's dark side, thereby rejuvenating the solar battery and insuring perpetual operation. Teed's unusual description of the cosmos closely paralleled the alchemist's philosopher's egg in which he first transmuted gold from base metal. The earth itself served as a sealed

philosopher's egg, and the sun provided the source of heat required to initiate the alchemy. The base metal to be transmuted into noble metal was mankind. Transmutation would come when the followers of Teed, 288,000 strong, metamorphosed into 144,00 hermaphroditic saints, biune in nature like the "Fatherhood of Being."⁶

The alchemical theme is evident throughout every area of Teed's philosophy, from cellular cosmology to Koreshan communitarianism. Though the curious ideas he articulated following the "Illumination" represent an amalgam of Swedenborgianism, Christianity, spiritualism, and socialism, alchemy served as the overarching principle. Even the New Jerusalem project offers evidence of Teed's alchemical convictions. He pictured the city thusly:

In its center is to rise the most magnificent temple the world has ever seen--the great fame of the Koreshans. Around this temple is to run in a circle a placid sheet of water (an arm of the Estero), and around that, the arcadium, a complex of structures wherein schools, gymnasium, etc., are to be housed . . . Two principal streets, each 400 feet wide are to intersect the whole city, and these are to be called meridian way, north and south, and parallel, east and west while two diagonal streets, each 200 feet wide, are to cross. The diameter of the octagon from side to side is to be exactly one-half of a mile, and within the inner space is to be a fine park, with the Triumphia Octogonia near it . . . The whole city is to be surrounded by a circular boulevard, and the length of the octagon has been taken from the diameter of the circle, the diagonal of the square of which is ten times that distance, 'which is our way of squaring the circle' . . . Placed at equal distances near the circumference are to be twenty-four distributing centers or stores.⁷

The boulevard encircling the Zion in the wilderness symbolized the philosopher's egg. At the center of the city was the Koreshan temple--the source of light and the impetus of change, or the fire necessary for the alchemist's transmutation. And, finally, the base material to be made noble were the people traversing the great avenues, and attending the schools and gymnasiums.

Following the arrival of Teed and his trio of disciples at Estero came two groups of Koreshans from Chicago. The first consisted of four men succeeded by the second, a contingent of thirty men and women. They purchased land, organized members, and began constructing New Jerusalem in earnest. By the end of the year the community and its one hundred members had purchased a sawmill and planer, erected several communal buildings, begun small agricultural experiments, and launched the Guiding Star Publishing House. Harmony and goodwill reportedly filled the air as they built the city at the "center of the universe."⁸

Realization of the ambitious project required financial and physical effort beyond the means of

one hundred members. "We want men," wrote Teed, "men with money, men without money, and men and money; but above all we want men." He then added, "We will, however, take money without men . . ."⁹ The communalistic alternative he promoted appealed to both men with money, and those without.

The Koreshan economic program was a curious and seemingly contradictory admixture of socialism and capitalism. Teed intended it to mollify labor and capital while unifying them into a streamlined, highly efficient industrial machine. The Koreshan social critique, though, was typically socialistic. They concluded that under capitalism workers earned merely half the value of their output, while employers received the other half. Teed argued that since "the basis of wealth is the relation of labor to the resources of Nature . . .," the only equitable system was one that equated cost according to labor and resources rather than capital.¹⁰

Simultaneously, Teed sympathized with capitalists faced with "Demand for higher wages or change of conditions [that] inevitably brings about inharmony [sic], strikes, lockouts, and other troubles, which very often swamp the enterprise to the entire ruin of the owners" Under the existing system workers found themselves trapped in wage-slavery with little choice but revolution and, concomitantly, industrialists, struggled against disruption, disharmony, and bankruptcy--or worse if they capitulated to the avaricious demands of labor--labor unionism. As Teed saw the situation, "The spirit which moves the corporate powers of the world to encroach upon the rights of the masses, is the same as that which moves the working classes into the conspiracy of labor unionism." If Koreshan communitarianism could remove the spirit of dissent and blend the interests of every segment of society by educating capitalists, laborers, and middle class about their mutual interests, then revolution could be averted. Teed offered a choice, which, in his words, "is not only a good thing for the poor man, or man of moderate means, but it is equally a good thing for the man who has considerable wealth." His program of "genuine" socialism, offered a "consociation of the capital of the world already accumulated, with the industry of the world, as would destroy their existing and abnormal [my emphasis] relations, and thereby eliminate the current conflict."¹¹ Only his plan could avert disaster.

Effecting the necessary education could be accomplished best by creating a model for the world to emulate. When the warring classes recognized that the Koreshan system at Estero was the most efficient

and equitable yet devised, they would experience a change of nature and join the cause. The Koreshan example would radiate beyond their New Jerusalem and change the world.

The Koreshans guaranteed all participants a stake in the economic system by allowing them to buy stock in the Koreshan Unity, Incorporated (chartered in New Jersey on September 26, 1903). The Co-operative division of the enterprise was the least restrictive and non-religious arm of the corporation. Members received the benefits of a communistic life without contributing all their possessions into the common treasury or accepting Koreshan religious dogma. The division was open to labors without money, individuals and money, and simple investors. In each case the relationship with the Unity centered around the purchase of stock. Stock sold for ten dollars a share, with the Unity retaining the right to repurchase any shares put on the market. Annual surpluses were to be distributed to prevent the increase of value and thus limit speculation.

Participants received Unity support in establishing a business equal in value to the number of shares they purchased. As an example, for a two hundred fifty dollar investment (theoretically the maximum single purchase) the Unity would establish an individual in the fish department of the cooperative communistic division. It provided a boat, engine, nets and tools worth two hundred fifty dollars. In return all fish and proceeds were divided equally with the Unity. The value of the enterprise varied with the number of shares an individual purchased. A large investor could qualify for a steamship line, whereas a small investor might receive nothing more than a modest farm. In every case, however, the relationship between the investor and the Unity represented something akin to industrial sharecropping. The Unity set up a business in return for an equal share of the proceeds.¹²

The benefits, though, went beyond business partnership. The Unity promised to furnish the shareholder and his family with food, clothing, and shelter. Furthermore it pledged to educate children and provided "fire protection, water, ice, telephone service, electric lighting, steam laundry, boat excursions, picnics, outings, theater, a church "free of a contribution box," and all the benefits of every municipal institution."¹³ Intent and practice did not always meet in Estero.

The Koreshans recognized that many laborers might possess interest in their project, and desirable skills, but no cash for investment. In that situation a worker could join by trading labor for

shares. The worker chose his department of employment and received wages at the prevailing union rate, along with free room and board. Once half his wages on account equalled the value of the shares he requested he received stock. He then assumed equal footing with members that had paid cash for their stock. Labor and capital found themselves on equal footing, thus eliminating conflict. In the event that stockholders chose to leave the community, they could either exchange their holdings for seven percent stock--like that available to the public--and receive interests rather than dividends, or sell the stock back to the community at par.

Cooperative members had complete discretion over family life, though every resident of the community was expected to contribute useful labor to the Unity. "The Koreshan Unity," warned Teed, "is not a charitable institution,"¹⁴ and as a result, women, men, and children were required to contribute enough labor to offset their expense to the corporation.

The only serious restriction felt by the cooperative members was a lack of organizational mobility. Only members of the religious order ever attained positions of leadership. Although the Koreshan advertised full community benefits and opportunities for all who purchased stock and toiled on Unity projects, only those who embraced the Koreshan faith ascended to the ranks of leadership.¹⁵

Leadership within the Koreshan Unity required membership in the Society Arch-Triumphant. Incoming members of this order first joined the outer court, or the Investigate order. This first step served two purposes. It allowed the member a sample of life within a communal celibate order without first making a commitment to stay permanently. Equally important, it allowed the Unity leaders to see if the religious novice could abstain from earthly vices and sacrifice "everything pertaining to individual loves." Upon joining the Society, all personal property transferred to the community. Family members were separated, with children falling under the care and direction of the Unity until they reached the legal age. Following the probationary period, the postulant entered the Ecclesia order of the Society Arch-Triumphant and achieved full membership in the Koreshan religious and communalistic order. Every director and manager of the Koreshan Unity belonged to this order, and like all members of the Society Arch-Triumphant they led celibate lives.¹⁶

The rationale of abstinence within communal orders has developed along several lines. In

keeping with his efforts to find scientific explanations for the prophecies of the Scriptures Teed developed a "scientific" rationale for celibacy. Man, according to Teed, had within him the power to overcome death. That power could be accessed through continence. By abstaining from sexual intercourse, and following Teed, the life forces would be conserved and immortality achieved. Teed explained that

It is not generally known that there is a hidden life principle in man called the hidden manna; the secret of that substance is in the sex function itself; and in the power to conserve the sex potencies, and to correctly appropriate them, resides the great secret of Immortal life.¹⁷

Celibacy for the Koreshans was not, as with several religious groups, a practice to develop a closer relationship with Christ in preparation for the marriage with the "Lamb," but rather it was part of a scientific method to obtain immortality. Of course the question could be raised as to the necessity of immortality on the heels of the millennium, or for that matter the need to create a new economic order for all of mankind when the new age was imminent, but those are subtle questions Teed chose not to address. His orientation between this world and the next shifted unnervingly. Nevertheless, his followers remained absolutely dedicated to him.

Early in 1896 the Koreshans completed their first large buildings, which included a communal dining hall and school building. Tree lined broad walks took shape, sea walls rose along the banks of the Estero River, and a large ditch drained the ubiquitous wetlands. When the community moved en masse to Estero in 1904, active operations included utility and electric works, sculpture and concrete plants, tin works, mattress making, hat and basket weaving shops, a shoe shop, a blacksmith shop and the community's pride--the Guiding Star publishing house. In Bristol, Tennessee, they purchased a furniture plant, and the group launched negotiations to purchase two hundred thousand acres of land from the government of Honduras.¹⁸ Members believed it their destiny to remake the world.

Unfortunately, the New Jerusalem never arose from the Florida swamps to rival the great cities of history. Today, only a few buildings of the Koreshan Unity remain. The grand boulevards, the magnificent parks, and the splendid temple never materialized. The dream of creating the New Jerusalem vanished with the death of Teed in 1908. Teed fled the world to avoid the spirit of dissent, but following his death dissent flourished in Estero and the community entered a period of conflict and decline.

1. "Estero," The Flaming Sword, May, 1932, 3; E. E. Damkohler, Estero, Florida: Memoirs of the First Settler (Fort Myers Beach, Florida: Island Press, 1967), 22, 23. E. E. Damkohler is Elwin Damkohler, Gustave's son. Gatewood, On Florida's Coconut Coast (Punta Gorda, Florida: Herald Publishing Company, 1944), 136.

2. Damkohler, Estero, 23.

3. Koresh [Cyrus R. Teed] and E. B. Webster, The Koreshan Unity: Co-operative (Estero, Florida: Guiding Star Publishing House, 1907), 20, 21.

4. Damkohler, Estero, 23; Karl H. Grismer, The Story of Fort Myers (St. Petersburg, Florida: St. Petersburg Printing Company, 1949), 189-191; Koreshan Unity: Co-operative, 34. For a discussion of the eventual conflict between the Koreshans and Fort Myers see, R. Lyn Rainard, "Conflict Inside the Earth: The Koreshan Unity in Lee County." Tampa Bay History, 3 (Spring/Summer, 1981), 5-16.

5. Koresh, [Cyrus R. Teed], The Illumination of Koresh: Marvelous Experience of the Great Alchemist at Utica, New York (Estero, Florida: Guiding Star Publishing House, n.d.), 5-6, 11. For a discussion of the general flight from reason during the nineteenth century see, James Webb, The Occult Underground (La Salle, Illinois, Open Court Publishing Co., 1974), 5-12.

6. R. Lyn Rainard, "The Alchemical Utopia," paper presented at the 1989 meeting of the Society for Utopian Studies.

7. "Dr. Teed's New Jerusalem," Chicago Herald, 26 April 1894. A map of the proposed city is at the Art Hall of the Koreshan State Historical Site, Estero, Florida.

8. "New Jerusalem," 1; W. W. F., "The Koreshan Community," Fort Myers Press, September 13, 1894, 1; Leroy Lamoreaux, Early Days on Estero Island: An Old Timer Reminisces (Fort Myers Beach, Florida: Estero Island Publishers, 1967), 4, 5, 15. Lamoreaux was the son of one of Teed's close advisors, Professor L'Amoreaux. He arrived at Estero in June of 1895; Grismer, Fort Myers, 190; Damkohler, Estero, 24-26, 28; S. J. Sargent, "Koreshan Unity," FIMP, 12 December 1895.

9. Koreshan Unity: Co-operative, 26.

10. Koreshan Unity: Co-operative, 5-11.

11. Koreshan Unity: Co-operative, 22, 9.

12. Although twenty-five shares represented the largest single purchase of shares, Koreshan advertisements provided scenarios of investments ranging from three hundred to fifty thousand dollars. See, Koreshan Unity: Co-operative, 20-21, 27.
13. Koreshan Unity: Co-operative, 18.
14. Koreshan Unity: Co-operative, 26.
15. Koreshan Unity: Co-operative, 27, 73, 84. See also, Robert Lynn Rainard, "In the Name of Humanity, 'The Koreshan Unity'" (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of South Florida, 1974).
16. Koresh [Cyrus R. Teed], The Koreshan Unity: General Information Concerning Membership and Its Obligations (Chicago: Guiding Star Publishing Company, N.D.), 10-12. A short period of correspondence was required before a person could enter the Investigate order of the Unity. See also, "The Koreshan Unity," FMP, 29 November 1894.
17. Koresh [Cyrus R. Teed], Interpretation of the Book of Revelation (Lester, Florida: The Guiding Star Publishing House, 1925), 93.
18. "A Visit to the Koreshan Unity at Lester," FMP, 16 April 1896; "Lester," FMP, 15 November 1890; Koreshan Unity: Co-operative, 33, 41-50, 60, 75-79; Damkohler, Lester, 25-26; Sargent, "Koreshan Unity;" "Dr. Teed's New Jerusalem."