

THE COMMUNITY THAT DWELT WITHIN THE EARTH

At about the same time as Lady Blount and the Zetetics were proving through experiments at the Bedford Level canal that the earth was flat, another group of experimenters were using similar methods to show that it was in fact a hollow shell, inhabited on its inner surface. The motto of this group was 'We live inside.'

Their leader and prophet was Dr Cyrus Teed, known to them as Koresh, a Hebrew version of his first name. He was, to say the least, a most unusual person. Born in 1839 in New York State, he became a practitioner of 'eclectic medicine', a system combining orthodox science with a religious outlook and the use of herbs and other natural remedies. From there he progressed to alchemy. Energy and matter, he believed, were two different forms of the same thing. It should therefore be possible to convert one into the other, and thus to transmute matter from its original nature into something quite different.

At Deerfield, New York, he set up an 'electro-chemical' laboratory, and one autumn evening in 1869 he discovered the philosopher's stone. Once matter had been reduced to energy, the secret of reconstituting it as matter of another kind lay in the use of polar magnetism. This implied that the earth and solar system constituted a perpetual, self-regulating battery, divinely created and comprehensible by human intelligence. He reasoned thus: 'Form is a fundamental property of existence; therefore, that which has not form has no existence. Limitation is a property of form. The universe has existence; therefore it has form, hence it has limitation.'

The unsettling notion of infinite space, inherent in modern cosmology, could be banished. Dr Teed had explained the universe in rational terms, and to him therefore was given the responsibility of leading mankind into a new age of perfect knowledge and serenity.

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As he pondered his discovery he fell into a state of visionary trance. The gentle voice of the Mother of the Universe spoke to him, and then she herself appeared, bathed in a light of purple and gold. She confirmed that he was the chosen instrument for redeeming the world, and promised that as both his mother and bride she would come to earth and assist in his appointed mission. The promise was fulfilled some years later when Dr Teed had another encounter with the Universal Mother in the person of Mrs Annie Ordway of Chicago who became thereafter his constant guide and companion.

It was not until he was nearly fifty that Dr Teed, as a reincarnation of the royal prophet Cyrus or Koresh, began to attract a serious following. Ever since the time of his vision, he had combined medical practice with preaching, lecturing and experimenting with the formation of ideal communities, intended as the nuclei of a future world-order based on his teachings. Such experiments were common at the time. Settlements throughout the United States were pioneered by the disciples of charismatic leaders, such as Joseph Smith's Mormons, the Perfectionists of Oneida and the Californian Brotherhood of the New Life. Many of them, like the Shakers, were communistic and celibate, and Teed, who had similar ideas, planned to unite them all into one body under his leadership. But the doctrines of Koresh were so outstandingly peculiar that none of the other groups found it possible to accept them. He acquired, however, a fair number of individual adherents, particularly among educated and professional people in Chicago, and there in 1888 was founded the Koreshan Unity. Its members pooled their resources and lived together as a community, pledging themselves to celibacy and abstention from alcohol, tobacco and opium, under the joint rule of Koresh and the Universal Mother, Mrs Ordway.

The Koreshans acknowledged Dr Teed as the Messiah, destined to replace Christianity with the new scientific religion, Koreshanity. Its cosmology was summarized as follows: 'The universe is a cell, a hollow globe, the physical body of which is the earth; the sun is at the center. We live on the inside of the cell; and the sun, moon, planets and stars are all within the globe. The universe is eternal, a great battery, and perpetually renews itself through inherent functions, by virtue of which it involves and evolves itself.'

By imitating the self-sustaining processes of life through the science of alchemy, it would be possible to achieve immortality and bodily

resurrection. When the whole world accepted Koreshanity, it would come under divine rule and the primeval Golden Age would be restored.

From the account so far, it could easily be assumed that Teed was a mere fanatic or charlatan preying on the gullible. He had, of course, to suffer the accusations which have always been brought against such cult-leaders: that he seduced and swindled his followers, alienated their family affections and so on. It is true that most of his following was female, and his vivacious, dark eyes were said to have had a fascinating effect. But no charges of misconduct were ever substantiated against him, and those who best knew him always spoke of Koresh as a sincere, honest, kind individual and a selfless leader. As long as he lived, his followers enjoyed happy, prosperous lives in the paradise he was perfecting for them and the whole world.

Koreshanity was not designed as a minority movement, but for universal acceptance. To achieve that, its promoters had to produce scientific proof that its basic tenets were true, and they also had to publicize it. From their very beginning they were excellent propagandists. They operated their own printing press and issued well-produced editions of Koresh's writings, regular magazines, broadsheets and pamphlets. But when it came to proving that the surface of the earth was concave, rather than convex as orthodoxy had it, Dr Teed was in some doubt as to the best procedure. Like the flat-earthers, he experimented with sightings along a straight line of canal, the Old Illinois Drainage Canal in his case, and from these and similar tests elsewhere he was able to theorize that the earth's apparent convexity was due to optical illusion. As evidence for this he pointed out that a ship which, to the naked eye, is almost invisible over the horizon can be restored fully into sight by the use of a telescope. This was the same observation which old Parallax in England had earlier used as evidence for the flat-earth thesis. It certainly did not amount to the scientific proof of concavity which the Koreshan movement needed. Not until 1897 was that proof finally obtained, by an historic experiment on the coast of south-west Florida.

Meanwhile, the community had moved house. In 1894 Dr Teed and Mrs Ordway had been prospecting in Florida, seeking a location for New Jerusalem, the projected capital city of the Koreshan new world-order. They discovered the ideal spot at Estero, a few miles south of Fort Myers. It was, said Koresh, a natural magnetic centre, most suitable for the future hub of universal commerce, education and

government. The land he wanted was occupied by a German settler, but the promise of eternal life and an honoured position at the centre of New Jerusalem persuaded the owner to part with his holding, and the Koreshans were soon established in their new colony.

One of the attractions of Estero, from Teed's point of view, was that it was near the flat coastline which provided a perfect testing-ground for his theory of the earth's concavity. For years he had been looking for a scientist who could design the appropriate experimental equipment. Finally he met the right man, Ulysses Grant Morrow. Teed and Morrow wrote a book together, *The Cellular Cosmogony*, describing their procedure in proving scientifically that the earth's surface slopes upwards.

The instrument they used was called a Rectilineator. Morrow designed it and had it built to accurate specifications. It consisted of several sections, the main feature of each being a double T-square twelve feet long. They were made of seasoned mahogany with brass fittings and braced with steel tension bars. Two uprights supported each section at heights which were adjustable. The idea was for the first section to be levelled so that the horizontal surface of the T-square was parallel with the surface of a body of water, and 128 inches above it. The second section was then to be placed against the first and attached to it with screws, extending the 'air line' another twelve feet. In the same way a third was to be added to the second, and the first section was then to be brought round to the other end to prolong the line still further. As the sections leap-frogged each other the air line would be increased by successive twelve-foot lengths. According to the 'globularists' or followers of Copernicus, the water line should gradually fall away from the air line because of the curvature of the earth. Believers in a flat earth would expect the two lines to remain absolutely parallel. Morrow and Teed, believing that the earth's surface was concave, were confident that the air line produced by the Rectilineator would approach nearer and nearer to the water line and eventually hit it. Thus, on the morning of 18 March 1897, when the first section of the Rectilineator was erected and levelled on the beach at Naples, Florida, by the surveyors of the Koreshan Geodetic Staff, three rival theories were placed in competition with each other. The question as to whether the earth's surface was concave, convex or flat was about to be determined scientifically.

Calculations based on the theory of the convex globular earth show that a line drawn tangent to its surface and projected in one direction

should, at one mile from the point of contact, be eight inches above the earth. For every additional mile thereafter, according to the accepted formula, the distance between the tangential line and the earth's surface should increase by the square of the number of miles multiplied by eight inches. Thus after two miles the distance should be $2 \times 2 \times 8 = 32$ inches, after three miles $3 \times 3 \times 8 = 72$ inches and so on. These figures are based on the official doctrine that the earth's diameter is about 8,000 miles, and Teed and Morrow agreed with the calculation. But they turned the whole thing inside out. They declared that 8,000 miles was the distance across the earth's hollow interior, and that its surface curved upwards, according to the established formula, rather than falling away.

After a month's work on the beach at Naples, the Koreshan Geodetic Staff had extended the air line made by the Rectilineator a distance of one mile. Results at this stage were promising: the air line, which at the start had been 128 inches above the surface water line, was now 8.02 inches nearer to it, almost exactly as Teed had predicted, and at the end of the second mile the distance between the two lines had diminished by 30.62 inches, close enough to the 32 inches his theory required. The Rectilineator was extended another half-mile, and the survey was then carried further by means of sighting poles and telescopes levelled on the Rectilineator's air line. This line, it was found, hit the water line at a distance of four and an eighth miles from the starting point. In that distance, therefore, the earth's surface had curved upwards by 128 inches, which Teed and Morrow judged near enough to the calculated figure to justify the Koreshan cosmology.

No one has ever seriously attempted either to debunk or to repeat the Rectilineator experiment, but it is natural for those who can not bring themselves to accept its results to wonder how they were obtained. The Rectilineator apparatus, though cumbersome, was scientifically sound, and so was the principle behind its use, and one can hardly suppose that the Koreshan surveyors, who lived by the doctrines of their leader, were engaged in an elaborate conspiracy of deception. Perhaps the answer lies in the malleable, obliging nature of the universe, which reflects every image projected upon it and gives every experiment a tendency to gratify the experimenter.

Koresh, his celibate community and his eccentric world-view were obvious targets for press ridicule, which they attracted in full measure.

Yet among his followers the Cellular Cosmogony worked well. It may be that, the more outrageous and exclusive are the beliefs which a group holds in common, the more effective they are in holding that group together in defiance of the outside world. At any rate, the Koreshan community flourished. In the early years of this century there were about two hundred settlers at the site of New Jerusalem at Estero and in smaller colonies elsewhere. The appearance of these energetic Yankees in sparsely populated south Florida had a profound effect on the district's economy. The Koreshans, many of whom were skilled in various crafts and trades, husbanded their lands, planted orchards, introduced new crops and livestock and founded useful industries. These included a saw-mill, a boat-building yard, a concrete factory and, for domestic purposes, a bakery, a cane-mill, a steam-laundry and a well-equipped printing shop. Members chose the work for which they were best adapted, and the products of farms, gardens and workshops were distributed according to need at the village store, where the surplus was sold to neighbours. A pleasure park, laid out along the Estero creek, was stocked with many different kinds of fruit trees and vegetables as well as ornamental plants and was furnished with picturesque urns made by the sculpture department. Cultural life centred on the school for general and Koreshan studies and the Art Hall. There were held regular exhibitions, concerts, lectures, feasts, festivals and religious services. The Koreshans dined communally, men and women at separate tables, a routine which was often varied by picnics in the park or further afield on one of the islands off the coast. On pleasant evenings they would place their orchestra in a boat and follow it round their bay in a flotilla, watch the sunset to the strains of music and sail home by moonlight.

To his faithful, hard-working flock Cyrus Teed was a good shepherd. He ruled in conjunction with Annie Ordway and a council of seven women, representing the seven planets. These luminaries lived chastely in a handsome eight-roomed house, one room for each of them and the other for the piano. Social historians and those with a practical interest in the formation of communities have recently been showing interest in the Koreshan model, partly because of the respect and equality for women which featured in it. Elliott Mackle, the leading historian of Koreshanity, paints an attractive picture of life at Estero, as long as Cyrus Teed was there to energize it. The fact that things went so smoothly must largely be attributed to the constant effect of his vision of

New Jerusalem. Potential converts were warned that not everything was yet perfect in the colony, but present hardships were more than made up for by the promise of pioneering the great city of an ideal civilization soon to come. Dr Teed had a magnificent painting giving a bird's-eye view of the future New Jerusalem. Based on the ancient geometers' image of harmony, a square and circle combined, the city's plan extended for miles across the Florida landscape. Broad avenues lined with palatial buildings radiated from its centre far out into the country, symbolizing the world-wide spread of Koreshanity. The streets were to be built on several different levels, separating pedestrians, carriages, passenger railways and commercial traffic. Other practical features included a 'movable and continuous earth closet' conveying the city's organic waste to a distant plant for recycling as fertilizer.

Although it was to be the centre of world commerce and industry as well as culture, New Jerusalem was to be quite free of industrial pollution. Steam and petrol machinery would be made obsolete by the perfection of alchemical science and the discovery of a clean, natural source of energy in the electro-magnetic currents of the earth and atmosphere. Teed anticipated modern ley-line and earth-energy researchers in believing that the ancient sages knew the secrets of manipulating the earth's vital forces, and that these secrets could be rediscovered and made use of in the science of the future. In his prophetic science-fiction novel, *The Great Red Dragon or The Flaming Devil of the Orient*, he foresaw the use of magnetic currents in the atmosphere to levitate 'anti-gravic' platforms from which missiles could be rained down on enemy armies. Also prophesied in the novel is a war in which a horde of anti-Christian orientals, led by the Japanese, sink the American fleet and begin invading the United States. When all seems lost they are routed by the aerial platforms, invented and made at Estero. Inside America the forces of big business are defeated by the masses, inspired by Koreshan ideals; New Jerusalem is built and its founders, implicitly Dr Teed and Mrs Ordway, preside over a regenerate world as instruments of the Divine Motherhood. All this to the loyal Koreshans was no fiction but an inspired prevision of what was soon to come about.

The Koreshans were generally on good terms with their country neighbours, who benefited from their industry and enterprise. They ran a regular service of passenger boats between Estero and the nearest

railhead at Fort Myers, where the citizens were also friendly. There was, however, one source of trouble, often encountered by immigrant communities: the natives had a rooted objection to being outvoted at political elections by newcomers. Fort Myers and the surrounding areas of Lee County were controlled by the Democrats. The local party administration was inbred and corrupt, and they resented the Koreshans' practice of block-voting for their own candidates. In politics, as in all their activities, the Koreshans were vigorous and determined. When polls were rigged against them they declared war on the Fort Myers Democrats and allied themselves with the Socialists to form their own Progressive Liberal Party. To support it, they started a weekly newspaper, *The American Eagle*. Composed and printed by the experts at the community press, it was of far better quality than any other Florida paper, and it quickly gained circulation at the expense of its Fort Myers rival, the organ of the Democrats. The Koreshan writers usually did best in the battle of editorials waged between the two papers. Their new party was seen as a threat to the local establishment, and from this there ensued an unpleasant incident which brought disaster upon the house of Koresh.

One afternoon in October 1906 a Koreshan politician was assaulted by a local bully in a Fort Myers street. Dr Teed, who happened to be near at hand with a party of followers, attempted to calm the assailant and was himself attacked, receiving several blows to the head. The town marshal was standing by but made no effort to intervene. The other Koreshans sprang to their leader's defence and were beaten up by the town mob. No one seemed to have been badly hurt, but from that day on Dr Teed's health began to decline. Though often in pain he continued to direct the round of activities at Estero, wrote his novel, travelled extensively on lecture tours and visited other Koreshan properties. Returning to Estero he tried to cure his infirmity by a variety of treatments, from salt-water baths to electro-therapy, but with no lasting results. In 1908, three days before Christmas, he died.

Many of the Koreshans simply could not believe it. They had always assumed that Koresh was immortal, so his apparent death must merely be a trance, a further stage in his progress towards divinity. His resurrection was expected to take place on Christmas Day, and the community watched and prayed over his body until the local health authority ordered its burial. A monumental vault was quickly erected on

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Estero Island, and therein were laid the remains of Cyrus Teed. From far and wide Koreshans flocked to the funeral, speculating on the possibility of a miraculous rising from the tomb. No immediate sign was given them, but some years later a violent storm hit Estero Island, the entire vault was washed away by the sea, and no trace was ever found of the body of Koresh. It was said at Estero that he had been transported to some faraway land in continuance of his mission, and that some day he would return home.

Koreshanity today

On the departure of their prophet the Koreshans came under the leadership of Mrs Ordway; but she defected in order to get married, and there followed a succession of leaders, all good people but lacking the inspired genius of the founder. Slowly the community wound down. There were quarrels and schisms, people drifted away and no new converts came forward to replace them. Among the Koreshans were a few married couples, living separately from the main celibate body, but most of their children left Estero when they grew up. One by one the industries closed down until only the printing works were left. They survived until 1949, producing Koreshan literature and *The American Eagle*, which had turned away from politics to become a gardening journal. In that year the print shop was destroyed by fire. From its peak of over two hundred members the community's strength had dwindled to a mere dozen. The final extinction of Koreshanity along with Dr Teed's dream of New Jerusalem seemed imminent.

Unexpectedly a renaissance took place. At the beginning of the Second World War a rare new member joined the group at Estero. Hedwig Michel came to America to escape the Nazis. She had been headmistress of a Jewish school in Germany and had fallen under the influence of a master on her staff, Peter Bender. A former pilot, wounded in the First War, he had taken up the study of mathematics. Certain calculations led him to formulate a hollow-earth theory very similar to Teed's. His *Hohlweltlehre* gained a considerable following in Germany and still has adherents there today. It was only after he had announced his theory that he came across a copy of Teed's *Cellular Cosmogony*. He entered into correspondence with the community at Estero and, when things were looking black for Jews in Germany, he

asked them whether they would give refuge to his fellow-believer, Miss Michel. The Koreshans sent her an invitation to come and live with them. Bender, who by that time had grown to fancy himself a reincarnation of Koresh, stayed on in Germany, was arrested by the Nazis and died in a prison camp.

When Hedwig Michel arrived at Estero she found the colony in a sad state of decay. Its remaining members were no longer the bustling Yankees of the early settlement. In appearance and speech they were now indistinguishable from the locals and they had adapted to the easy-going pace of Southern life. Their riverside park was overgrown and many of their buildings were empty and derelict. In the best manner of a German headmistress Miss Michel took things in hand. She had the most useful houses repaired, organized the finances, revived education and generally put new heart into the community. *The American Eagle* was relaunched in 1965, this time as a journal of ecology. Through her efforts the future of the Koreshan Unity was assured.

In 1967 the board of the Unity struck a bargain with the State of Florida, presenting their village and some of the land round it for use as a public park, in return for which the State agreed to rebuild the settlement as it was in its prime and to restore its ornamental gardens. The Koreshans seem to have done well out of the deal. A visit to Estero in April 1983 was rendered delightful by guide Louis Cureton, an expert on Koreshanity and an obvious sympathizer. His lecture at the Art Hall was illustrated with relics from the days of Koresh, preserved there by the State, including his charts demonstrating the hollow earth, his picture of New Jerusalem and instruments of the community orchestra and brass band. All that is missing is the Rectilineator, the surviving section of which is now in a museum at Fort Myers. Having secured protection by the State for their principal shrine, the Koreshans have turned to education. They no longer emphasize the hollow earth doctrine, but other aspects of Koreshanity are studied at their new college, located a few hundred yards from their original settlement. The whole place is still pervaded by the spirit of Dr Teed. His plan for New Jerusalem has never been forgotten at Estero, and the land on which he meant to build it is still largely in Koreshan hands. It is now extremely valuable real estate. Towers of luxury apartments throng its neighbouring coastline, but the only development which will be permitted at Estero is the construction of New Jerusalem.