

CULTS AND POLITICS

There is no "explanation" for the tragedy which has taken place. Jews know. One does not come to "understand" such a cataclysm.

There is a lesser point to be made, however, before it is too late. The point is not about the ineffable loss of nine hundred lives, but about the role of religious and secular cults in the political life of a community like San Francisco.

In both the political and the cultic, we are still reaping harvest from some of the "New Politics" of the 1960s.

At its worst, some of the New Politics was not politics at all. It was anti-politics. It said that the past was a complete betrayal. It said that America was a complete betrayal. It said that there was nothing redeemable about either. It said that there was a secret conspiracy on high to hold power. Only by pulling everything down, could anything good be built -- if there was indeed anything good to build.

Those who bombed buildings and terrorized America were acting out this logic. The Symbionese Liberation Army acted out this logic, and went to its own fiery death. Those who thought they would spark a revolution by such acts were futilely engaged in what Lenin once called "revolutionary infantilism." Others committed "political" acts for their own symbolic sake. So, the "Zebra" killers in San Francisco gunned down people at random.

This was all the politics of nihilism -- often more concerned with personal salvation than with social reform. But political and personal nihilism are never far apart (and are notably bridged by nihilizing drugs).

The 1960s also generated "cultism," religious and secular. When one feels alienated and betrayed, it is comforting to join a relatively small, closely-knit, like-minded in-group with some kind of salvational bent. For some, a single charismatic leader is attractive; for others, the group itself is charismatic enough.

As the New Politics predictably failed to revise the world, cults flourished. Some people turned their backs on politics altogether, and joined non-political cults. But some cults became exaggerated extensions of the New Politics, complete with the doctrine of betrayal, the emphasis on personal salvation, the anti-political mood -- but with political goals.

But the New Politics had another, less exotic effect. In some places the "old politics" was dismembered, along with the impact of the mainstream parties, leaving a vacuum.

In San Francisco, for example, there developed the new-politics mythology of "neighborhoods" as political centers. Indeed our local political system was revamped to accommodate to this new politics by way of district elections..

One result was to enable small organized groups to exert inordinate political power. They could do so by simulating "grass roots" and producing several hundred bodies at the push of a button for media-worthy demonstrations, or sloggng precinct work. They were suffused by the kind of intensity and in-group loyalty which particularly characterized cultist groups, religious/political or otherwise.

But there was something more. The cultist groups which entered the political arena oozed social beneficence. They were full of Good Words and Good Works. The Good Words were such as "the people," "democracy," "social change." The Good Works were such as child care centers, drug rehabilitation programs, hot food for senior citizens. They were, for the most part, legitimate good works, works of compassion. But the groups which mounted them often had some further political ends as well.

We used to be wary of evil means to arrive at good ends. Now we must also increasingly be wary of good means to arrive at manipulative ends. The Rabbis warned us that the Torah is not to be used as a digging tool. So, Good Works are not to be used as a digging tool.

But today we still have people recalling the Good Works of a cult as though those works had legitimized full support. However, the snake in the garden was always there to see: a distorted political view, the rejectionist view of the New Politics at its worst, ribbed with nihilism.

There is now going to be a lot of useless discussion about fighting cultist groups. We can't just fight them defensively. Many of them will not have any exotic evils to expose, but they will still degrade our political and social life.

Public-spirited citizens and politicians may become more wary of Good Words and Good Works -- as sometimes they should -- but that is obviously not enough. It was the stale and unresponsive nature of "old politics" which partly accounted for the new politics, and what followed. We have to redeem good words and good works for mainstream religion and mainstream politics. Unless more people become more actively involved towards both those ends, all our investigations and condemnations and attempts to contain the variety of cultism will be much sound and fury, signifying very little indeed.

(Syndicated by the San Francisco Jewish Bulletin)