

THE NEW CULTS AND POLITICS

There is no "explanation" for the Jonestown tragedy. Jews know; one does not come to "understand" such a cataclysm.

There is,, however, a political side to cult growth which can be understood. We are reaping harvest from some of the "New Politics" of the late 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 and negation. But political and personal nihilism are never far apart (and are notably bridged by nihilizing drugs).

When one feels alienated, betrayed and hopeless, it is comforting to join a like-minded, closely-knit, strongly-led in-group with some kind of salvational bent. That is the practical definition of a "cult" in our world today. Sometimes these are "traditional" religious cults, turning away from the world. Sometimes they are secular, political cults -- but no less cults. And sometimes, like the People's

Temple or the Moonies, they are religious/political cults, mixing religious ideology with political ideology, personal salvation with political salvation. They are often exaggerated extensions of the New Politics: steeped with a sense of betrayal, rejectionist, paranoid, politically messianic but ribbed with nihilism. Therefore, always close to destruction or self-destruction.

As the New Politics failed to revise the world, such New Cultism flourished. 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: "the people," "democracy," "social change." The Good Works: 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 have learned to be wary of evil means to arrive at good ends. Now we must also increasingly become wary of good means to arrive at evil ends. The Rabbis warned us that the Torah is not to be used as a digging tool; so, with Good Works,

There is now going to be a lot of useless discussion about fighting cultist groups. Legislation and expose will be of limited use. It would be a dangerous game for the state to decide which religious groups were "legitimate" and which were not, or to institute "religious regulations." Some groups with overtly evil practices would succumb to investigation. However, many New Cults -- political or religious/political -- will not have any exotic evils to be dramatically exposed -- but they will still seduce our youth, and degrade our political and social life.

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It was the stale and unresponsive nature of the "old politics" which partly accounted for the new politics and what followed. And that followed a withdrawal from active participation in politics and general community life by citizens of the "sound middle." The same might be said of our religious life.

We have to redeem good words and good works for mainstream politics -- and mainstream religion. Unless more people become more actively involved, politically participant, all our investigations and condemnations and attempts to contain the New Cultism will be much sound and fury, signifying very little indeed.

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