

MANAS

VOLUME XXXII, No. 10

Thirty Cents

MARCH 7, 1979

SKEPTICS AND TRUE BELIEVERS—A DEADLY SYMBIOSIS

[Last November, some 900 members of the People's Temple, the creation of Jim Jones, an Indiana-born politico-religious leader, drank poison and died, some willingly, some under pressure, on the order of Jones. This mass suicide of men, women, and children took place in the jungle settlement of Jonestown, Guyana, on the northern coast of South America. They had come there in 1977 from the San Francisco area, where Jones had been active since the middle 60s. While no known survivors witnessed the mass death, a little before the event one of the participants spoke proudly of "revolutionary suicide" to further the struggle against fascism and racism. Jones was found dead from a bullet in the head.]

THERE are two reactions to the People's Temple tragedy that would be deeply mistaken.

One would be to dismiss the event with a bewildered shrug as an unaccountable aberration. It *is* an aberration—in the sense that disease is an aberration of the healthy body. But when disease is chronic or threatens to become epidemic, it cries out for diagnosis and cure. It must have our attention. So too the lethal fanaticism of People's Temple, which once again confronts us with a disease of the mind that has repeated itself too often in the mass movements and sectarian violence of the modern world.

The other, more likely mistake would be to write off all "cults" indiscriminately as social evils, and to call for their investigation and harassment, or at least for their unrelenting denigration in the public eye. This would be to forget how much that is invaluable in our cultural heritage has been incubated in the committed fellowship of cults, sects, and esoteric fraternities often gathered around an inspired leader. Need we recall that once Christianity was a community of twelve comrades drawn together in witness to a messianic founder, and Buddhism a mere handful of monks serving an illuminated master? The cults of the modern world include the Mennonites, the Brethren, the Amish, the Bruderhof—all gentle and retiring pacifists. The Quakers, who have for so long been numbered among the most precocious democratic and humanitarian forces in Western society, began their history as an outlandish sect of enthusiasts guided by an obstreperous prophet whose loyalty to "the inner light" transcended all law and convention.

We really have no choice as to whether we will or won't have cults and charismatic leaders among us. They are among the irrepressible constants of human society. No

amount of official persecution or popular disapproval seems able to wipe them out; if necessary, they persevere underground as forces of unrest and rebellion. They may even survive, as they frequently have in our secular era, by casting off their obvious religious characteristics. The turbulent age of democratic revolution through which we are still passing found its seedbed in small, often secret societies of fervently committed comrades. The style of these cadres may be militantly agnostic, but their concern for ideological purity, their zeal for revolutionary justice, their devotion to prophetic leaders—Saint-Just, Mazzini, Marx, Lenin, Mao, Fidel—all this is surely the residue of religious passion.

The media, always in search of convenient stereotypes, would have us think of the New Age cults as a uniform breed of mindless, dope-damaged zombies programmed for unquestioning subservience to Svengali-like masters. Comparisons to Nazism abound in commentaries and features dealing with People's Temple. To a degree, the dropped-out, spaced-out, pathologically dependent adolescents who became the Manson family may have fit that image. People's Temple did not. Its disciples covered a broad social spectrum: black and white, old and young, affluent and penniless, educated and semi-literate. Nothing strains the understanding more than the fact that so many working-class, adult blacks—people long schooled in the hard knocks and racist treacheries of life—should have so gullibly delivered their money, their hopes, and at last their lives into the hands of a deranged white messiah. It is not as if they had no place else to turn in the local black community of San Francisco for religious sustenance and social action.

More untypically still as New Age cults go, the Temple was as much a left-wing political crusade as a church. In the course of the seventies, its social program grew steadily more disaffiliated from what Jim Jones came to regard as a "fascist America" and drifted rapidly toward outspoken communist sympathies. Literature I received from the Temple as much as ten years ago often read like the radical press in its treatment of Vietnam, Chile, Iran. Interviewed a few days after the mass suicide in Guyana, one of Jones' surviving disciples in San Francisco, an articulate young white, protested, "People keep saying we're some kind of religious cult. We're *socialists*. We'll always be socialists." And, reportedly, right up to the last, Jones was flirting with the fantasy of moving his following to Cuba

or the Soviet Union. We are not familiar with such a bizarre mixture of faith-healing evangelism and Marxist ideology. It should warn us—as do the examples of the Manson family and the S.L.A.—that fanatical violence can be as much the result of paranoid politics as of paranoid religion.

If we avoid these two mistaken responses, what are we left to do? The “we” I speak of here is primarily those who live the life of the mind, for whatever their influence may be: the academics, intellectuals, clergy, publicists . . . those who worry their way into print over such issues. We can ask what it is that drives people to such terrifying extremes of self-enslavement, and what responsibility we may bear for keeping them from that dire choice.

Why do people surrender their freedom to totalitarian masters? The answer is not that they are morally weak. People who sacrifice all they have and are, even for a corrupted cause, cannot be evaluated that cheaply—not if we would reach out to them in charitable support. Rather, they are morally desperate. Even at their ugliest, they act from an overwhelming desire to possess and serve a transcendent ideal. No matter how brutally the Hitlers, Stalins, and Reverend Joneses of the world may finally betray that craving for absolute commitment, they first of all awaken and liberate it. They dignify its existence by letting it be publicly professed and lived. For that, they win the undying devotion of their followers. Then, of course, they go on to feed that moral hunger on hatred and to harness it to their own ruthless uses. If they are Svengalis, the device they use to rivet their victims’ attention is our finest human quality: the aspiration for self-transcending purpose.

To so much, regarding the psychology of true believers, many might agree. But from here forward, we face a decisive parting of the ways in the intellectual community. To one side, there are those who see moral aspiration as an inherently tragic element in our nature, believing that there is nothing in all the universe that answers to its need beyond our own tentative and arbitrary inventions, nothing that can assuage its longing except heroic resignation before the alien void. And to the other side, there are those like myself who believe that the pursuit of transcendent meaning manifests an authentic vocation that is as real a part of the world as any physical object, and as capable of being examined, discovered, known. From this viewpoint, the highest mission of intellect is to clarify that vocation in the light of our unfolding historical experience so that we may one day offer it a universal response.

A truth that remains true and is many times repeated runs the risk of being mistaken for a cliché, and then restless minds may be piqued into looking for more refined notions somewhere beyond the simple reality of the matter. One such truth is that the intellectual life of modern society is an ethical vacuum created out of doctrinaire skepticism and relativistic philosophy. Since the Age of Reason, the most gifted talents of the Western world have been predominantly invested in the proposition that nothing is absolute, nothing is sacred, that knowledge is bounded by numbers and empirical fact. All of us who have passed

through the standard curriculum of higher education have learned the lesson, mastered the style. Confronted with moral zeal—our own or that of others—we reach for our guns, fearing the fierce energy that lies hidden in this mightiest of human passions. So it is that those who are most responsible for educating that zeal default; they respond with a studied negativity, or resort to clever ploys and put-downs, never realizing that it may be as dangerous to repress the moral needs of people as we have learned it is to repress their sexual needs.

Only think back over the past few years: how many reports, documentaries, studies have we had that have played village atheist with the preachers and the swamis, the cult leaders and true believers? And notice how often the discussion stops there, content to discredit and debunk, offering nothing to the hunger for moral certainty which reaches out to these figures. For, indeed, few of us know how to nourish that appetite; it is no part of becoming learned in our society to deal with such responsibilities. On the contrary, the very meaning of “enlightenment” in the modern Western world is to insist that reason and intellect are the hammer of all absolutes, instruments of radical doubt and critical subversion.

I would not argue that many other societies in the past have found more graceful ways of handling the ethical and metaphysical needs of their members; some have done far worse. They have purchased dogmatic certainty at the expense of becoming cruel, authoritarian regimes. But it is the distinction of modern intellectual life in the West that so many of us have turned ourselves into religious illiterates as a matter of principle.

Alfred North Whitehead once observed that

The common sense of the eighteenth century, its grasp of the obvious facts of human suffering, and of the obvious demands of human nature, acted on the world like a bath of moral cleansing. . . . But if men cannot live on bread alone, still less can they do so on disinfectants.

His words remind us of the fissure that runs through our culture. At the bottom, the ordinary millions who cannot diet on the disinfectants of critical intellect continue to nurse transcendent longings, for this is, at last, a deep, natural need of our kind. So they flock in record numbers to born-again preachers; they cast horoscopes and puzzle over the I Ching; they sign up with Scientology, Krishna Consciousness, and the Course on Miracles. For the most part, people grope their way into these commitments, and where they finish is little more than a matter of spiritual roulette. Often the first thing that comes along to offer ungrudging hospitality to their capacity for wonder and their need for metaphysical anchorage captures their complete allegiance. Perhaps it will be something wise and gentle; too frequently it is a commercial gimmick; in a few unhappy cases, it is vicious nonsense. But no amount of mocking and scolding will stop people from taking the gamble.

Meanwhile, on the intellectual heights a Himalayan distance away, we have an exquisite culture of doubt and despair which interprets the peculiar, transitional anxieties of modern society as an essential feature of the human condition. The major themes of that culture—angst, ab-

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A DEADLY SYMBIOSIS

(Continued)

surdity, alienation—are now so much the commonplace of contemporary art and thought that they can serve as the stock in trade of satirists like Woody Allen and Jules Feiffer. In these lofty regions, a courageous air of cosmic abandonment passes for the leading fashion of the day, and conducting autopsies on dead gods is a freshman philosophy assignment. As long as this remains the prevailing intellectual posture, what else can we expect but that those who lack the necessary Stoic fiber to hold the stance for a lifetime will take their spiritual needs to “anti-intellectual” sources for gratification? Nor should we be surprised that demagogues and commercial opportunists rush forward to exploit the situation, for those needs are power lying in the streets waiting to be seized. In effect, these two elements breed off one another in a kind of deadly symbiosis. By indiscriminately denying the validity of all the absolutes to which spiritual need would offer its allegiance, secular skepticism leaves the field open to quacks and rascals. The quacks and rascals are then free to announce the futility of intellect and to appeal to blind faith and gut feeling. Which, in turn, confirms the skeptic's position that religious conviction is intellectually squalid and socially dangerous. It is as Yeats warned: where “the best lack all conviction, the worst are full of passionate intensity.”

I think few of those who have learned to navigate the

skeptical orthodoxy and existential terror that dominates the contemporary cultural mainstream realize what an emotional toll this gruelling style of life and thought takes of the public generally—even among those who have never seen a Bergman or Fassbinder film, never attended a Beckett or Pinter play, never read Sartre, Camus, Heidegger. Nevertheless, word reaches them that the sophisticated tastes of the day run to nightmare art and nihilistic philosophy; it filters down and gets around that the great minds of the time believe we live in the eclipse of God, where the purposeless gyrations of subatomic particles are counted more real, more fascinating than the ideals and teachings toward which the human spirit reaches out. All this is a steady, grinding pressure of tough upon tender minds that finally drives the desperate toward blind, fanatical commitments.

It is really no great feat to recognize Reverend Jones, Charles Manson, the Maharaj Ji for what they are—frauds, fools, or opportunists. Picking apart their doctrines is like shooting fish in a rain barrel. It is an easy exercise in basic cynicism, and it convinces nobody who is vulnerable to their appeal and has nowhere else to turn. The great unaddressed challenge of our time begins beyond that task of logical demolition; it is to reassess the spiritual need to which these charismatic figures attach themselves. What do we make of that need? Do we, with Freud, regard it as an illusion that deserves to have no future? Do we, with Marx, dismiss it as an opiate of the backward masses? With the positivist philosophers, do we discard it as a meaningless confusion of language, or with the existentialists, do we revile it as a cowardly retreat into bad faith? With the behavioral psychologists, do we analyze it as so much noise in the programming of the human biocomputer? And do we, then, continue to scorn and scold all those who weaken to the appeal of absolute values?

Or do we, with some humility, at last begin a respectful dialogue with those who cry out for guidance, recognizing their longing as a reality and a glory of our human condition, as much our own as theirs?

Berkeley, Calif.

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Ersatz religion that poisons

WASHINGTON — The most recent deferment of the upward spiral of history, the carnage in Guyana, has a riveting repulsiveness: What cold flame burns in adults who serve "communion" of Kool-Aid and cyanide to children? The episode reminds: Madness can be a communicable disease.

The Peoples Temple is to a real temple what the Symbionese Liberation Army was to a real army: a lunatic charade. It is another demonstration, in a century replete with them, of how far, physically and morally, people will go to slake the fatal thirst for patent medicine for the soul, medicine promising a feeling of completeness

and meaningfulness. But the trek from San Francisco, where the Peoples Temple began, to the Guyanese jungle, was direct.

Perhaps the most compelling location in modern literature is the jungle in Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness." The jungle that transformed and consumed Mr. Kurtz throbbed with "all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men." Kurtz's last words — "The horror! The horror!" — are in the epigraph on the original manuscript of T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland."

A jungle is, of course, primitive, but it also can be a metaphor for modernity. A jungle, lush and lawless, is a place where people can shuck off the dead hand of convention and enjoy "liberty" as defined by the modern world: the absence of social restraints.

The hegira of the Peoples Temple to Guyana was a quintessentially radical undertaking. This absurd and sinister errand into the wilderness may have been intended as a flight from civilization's discontents. It certainly was a rejection of civilization's saving patience, the slowly shaping network of duties and dependencies and other indispensable relationships by which humans are painstakingly made, and tenuously kept, humane.

What happened to Kurtz happened to the "communicants"

of the Peoples Temple: "... there was something wanting in him ... the wilderness had found him out early ... I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude ... It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core."

Eliot put the words "Mistah Kurtz — he dead" on the title page of "The Hollow Men."

*We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together*

Hollowness at the center of individuals, and of modern civilization, is a recurring theme in this century's strongest poetry. It is in William Butler Yeats' "Second Coming": "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold ..."

That is the most insistently quoted poem of this century because it is so apposite to the many deferments of the upward spiral of history:

*... Mere anarchy is loosed
upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;*

*The best lack all conviction,
while the worst*

Are full of passionate intensity

From the final line of Yeats' poem, Joan Didion took the title for her essay "Slouching Towards Bethlehem." The essay,

written in 1967, depicted the political and chemical and other wild religions in the rabbit-warren mind of the San Francisco's "counterculture," the incubator of the Peoples Temple.

In San Francisco, where Patty became Tania who became Patty, "consciousnesses" are put on and taken off like blue jeans and, like jeans, fade. The Peoples Temple is another monument to the modern belief in the plasticity of mankind.

Casting a cold eye on the credulous children of the Haight Street drug culture, Didion wrote:

"These were children who grew up cut loose from the web of cousins and great-aunts and family doctors and lifelong neighbors who had traditionally suggested and enforced the society's values. They are children who have moved around a lot. San Jose, Chula Vista, here. They are less in rebellion against the society than ignorant of it, able only to feed back certain of its most publicized self-doubts, Vietnam, Saran-Wrap, diet pills, the bomb ... They are ... an army of children waiting to be given the words."

The last words poured into the empty vessels who were the people of the Peoples Temple were words about serving some god and socialism with "revolutionary suicide." That summarizes the infantile leftisms and ersatz religions that poison people who swallow them.

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