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Stephen A. Kent. *From Slogans to Mantras: Social Protest and Religious Conversion in the Late Vietnam War Era.* Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001. xix + 243 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8156-2948-1; $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8156-2923-8.

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New Leftists With New Tricks, or Neo-conservatives?

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In 1974, when Stephen Kent was a 22-year-old hippie, he found himself in a packed house listening to a teen-aged guru that Rennie Davis hailed as the "Perfect Master." Davis, who had been one of the New Left's most prominent and gifted leaders, came dressed in a business suit, along with the guru's entire male entourage. Kent was flabbergasted by the enthusiastic reaction of his peers for this young guru, whose message Kent found "banal" and whose delivery seemed "amateurish" (p. xvi). Kent's inspiration to write this book came from an overriding question that sparked his curiosity that day: why were these sixties youth, like Rennie Davis, so attracted to and accepting of these authoritarian religious leaders?

Kent concludes that, by the late Vietnam War era, activist youth were frustrated and disillusioned by what they perceived to be the failures of New Left methods to achieve movement goals. Therefore, they were suffering from a "crisis of means" which made attractive the messages of many non-mainstream, mystical religious groups who claimed that their religious methods would bring the same goals to fruition (p. 5). In other words, Kent maintains that the appeal rested in the belief that religious means could achieve what years of marching and protesting could not: "a fundamental restructuring of social and political power in society" (p. 26). He intends his thesis argument to complement that of scholars like Steven M. Tipton, who emphasizes that the attraction was rooted in a crisis of meaning felt by youth.[1] In order to discern how activists, like Davis, exchanged one way of life for another, Kent mined the archives of underground and alternative presses, read the literature of religious groups, and interviewed twenty informants who had moved from activism to mysticism. He is less interested in the numbers of people who made this transition than in the process by which converts rationalized and understood it.

Kent reminds the reader, first, that both the activist and countercultural aspects of the sixties' youth movement contained spiritual strains. Activists embraced their causes as moral ones, and many youth used drugs, as Aldous Huxley wrote, "to be shaken out of the ruts of ordinary perception, to be shown for a few timeless hours the outer and the inner world 'as they are apprehended, directly and unconditionally, by Mind at Large"' (p. 12). In her song "Woodstock," Joni Mitchell describes the concert revelers as people who wanted to set their souls free and "get back to the Garden." In the early to mid-1960s, youth were idealistic about their abilities to change society. By the late 60s and early 70s, however, as the assassinations of admired leaders stole their hope, as the war's destructiveness escalated, and as an increasingly violent New Left seemed to accomplish little more than internal implosions, Kent maintains that youth turned to spiritual groups as alternative avenues to the same ends. These groups also provided them with a sense of peace, status and community.

Kent focuses on ten specific spiritual groups that wooed many disaffected youth into their ranks, six of eastern origins and four that are western or syncretic: the Divine Light Mission, the Hare Krishnas, Meher Baba, the Naropa Institute (led by Chogyam Trungpa), Scientology, the Happy, Healthy, Holy Organization (3HO), Transcendental Meditation, the Unification Church (also known as the Moonies), the Children of God (later called The Family), and the Christian World Liberation Front. While recognizing their differences, Kent focuses on their similar messages and methods of attraction. Frequently they promised that the youth movement's goals could be accomplished through the purification of individual lives, and Kent illustrates well how several groups used radical movement rhetoric to hook activists' interest. God

will transform society and bring peace, they claimed, if enough people purify themselves by following the religious practices of certain spiritual leaders. Therefore, converts were encouraged to switch from targeting the sin in society to focusing on that within the individual.

The most shocking aspect of these conversions is that many of these groups were authoritarian and conservative in structure and ideology. For example, both the Krishnas and Moonies were anti-communist. The Unification Church even supported U.S. policy in Vietnam, defended Nixon during Watergate, and endorsed Ronald Reagan's campaigns. Many demanded strict, rigidly planned lifestyles, did not condone questioning, independent action or thought, and were highly patriarchal. The Divine Light Mission and the Children of God maintained that women should be subservient to men and adopt what were essentially nineteenth-century "cult of domesticity" rules for behavior. Even the DLM's emphasis upon suits and ties for men (as demonstrated by Rennie Davis) stood in sharp contrast to the youth culture of the time. Kent highlights these contradictions and explores how converts rationalized and reconciled them. The explanations include feeling true love and a sense of "specialness" within their religious communities, as well as genuinely believing that their own spiritual purification was necessary to save the world. Stewart Alpert, a friend of Rennie Davis, wrote that "a lot of young people are looking for Christs, Babas, Swamies, and gurus to pull them out of a never ending bummer" (p. 179), and perhaps this made them willing to overlook the hypocrisies. However, I would be interested in a deeper, more detailed account of how the converts reconciled the contradictions intellectually. Kent senses the contradictions as well, for he puzzles over how so many youth abandoned the movement's principle to "question authority."

I also see in these paradoxes a contradiction within Kent's thesis argument (or perhaps a point that needs further clarification). If the converts were attracted to these religions because they supposedly maintained movement goals, then why would they enter into and remain with groups that essentially rejected human equality (including feminism), free speech, free expression in dress (nonconformity), critical thinking, an end to red-baiting, and a breakdown of bureaucratic, top-down systems of authority? If, as Kent says, the overriding movement goal was "a fundamental restructuring of social and political power in society" (p. 26), then why did youth convert to groups that ignored many New Left goals in practice, and seemed interested in restoring certain behaviors that resembled 1950s America? One fascinating piece of Kent's research includes an examination of how sociologists first treated this religious phenomenon. Sociologists tended to see the youth conversions as positive because these religious groups were bringing wayward rebels back into conformity with societal norms. Even these sociologists recognized that the dictates of the religious groups were more reflective of conservative rather than radical values. Was there a disjunction between religious groups' rhetoric and practice in terms of goals that youth simply chose to overlook in these supposedly "perfect" societies? Or were youth willing to forgo some specific movement goals in favor of the vague ones of "love" and "world peace," which were extolled, not only by gurus, but by many liberals and conservatives alike.

Finally, while the sociologists interpreted these religious youth as moving back into conformity with society's more conservative social norms, did the youth perceive themselves as becoming more "conservative"? In other words, were they in some manner following the paths of former activists like David Horowitz, or religious ones like Richard John Neuhaus (Lutheran) and Michael Novak (Catholic), into openly neo-conservative, and supposedly more moral, ideologies? Can any connections be made here? Robert Wuthnow distinguishes religious "liberals" from "conservatives" by their preferred methods of making social change. Liberals, he says, favor direct action against the social injustices, while conservatives advocate appealing to the individual's soul and attacking the sin lying therein.[2] Using his criteria, Kent's youth moved from "liberal" to "conservative" when they surrendered direct action in favor of promoting individual purity. Such labels can be slippery, and yet, because mainline churches have been torn apart by them since the sixties era, I wonder how Kent might frame his subject of study in light of them.

From Slogans to Mantras is clearly and succinctly written, and makes for a quick, engaging read. The examples Kent cites provide a window into the minds of disillusioned youth from the late Vietnam War era, as well as into ten popular non-traditional religious groups that captured their interest during this period. This book would be a worthwhile addition to an American religious history course interested in raising questions about the post-Protestant establishment era.

Notes

[1]. See Steven M. Tipton, *Getting Saved from the Sixties: Moral Meaning in Conversion and Cultural Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

[2]. Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 146-149.

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