

A religion of protest

By ROBERT REHAK

In its broadest form, the movement sweeping our campuses today can best be described as anarchistic. But this movement is not so much a political as a religious one. Any distinctions today between the religious and political spheres are extremely tenuous.

The anarchists' subordination of mechanistic to organic or human values which Mumford, Marcuse, Roszak, and numerous others have pointed out, has resulted in their (the anarchists') political rejection of the credentialed society. Because of the emphasis placed on the ordering of values, anarchism is highly ethical. And in this, its ethical-humanist aspect, it reveals itself in its true light --not as a political movement, but as an essentially religious one.

While church attendance on campus has been declining radically, protest has been increasing astronomically. Indeed, protesting today is the student's equivalent of attending church. Political activism is a non-theistic religious experience. The historical, psychological, symbolic, and sociological parallels between contemporary activist political phenomena and religion are overwhelming.

For instance, both are a form of moral cleansing. The ritual of protest reproduces the same feeling as the symbolic purification of religious purging. Protest can be interpreted as secular penance or absolution whereby the individual expunges himself of the guilt which accrues to him through his passive complicity in a corrupt society.

Just as dying the old life precedes being born into the new, the renunciation of the dehumanization and alienation of technology, of the Vietnams, the Cambodias, and the Kent States is the symbolic severance of ties with the degeneracy of the status quo. This severing is an effort to reorder and reorganize life according to sacred, non-technological values. It is a sort of political baptism.

Seen in this sense, sin is not alienation from God, but alienation from the self. The anarchists are not asking for the freedom to become someone or something, but rather the freedom to become themselves. To the extent that technology circumscribes our thought processes and imposes its needs over human needs, we become alienated from our own essential nature.

Participation in both religion and political activism produces the same satisfying sense of solidarity or communality. This feeling has long been recognized as one of the primary psychological attractions of the religious mode of life. It is no wonder then that the youth movement has rejected the artificiality of institutional and class barriers which undermine our capacity for collective action and has instead also chosen the vitality of a communal life style. It favors mass rallies over the isolation of the voting booth, openness and honesty of expression over the stifling rigidity of role structures.

What Charles Reich, one of the youth cultures leading exponents, has termed the Greening of America, the effort to liberate America from the alienation and sterility of its technology and regain a lost vitality, is little more than a massive, modern counterpart of the primitive fertility cult.

Many observers have pointed out the similarity between the drug experience and the moment of religious insight. Our heads feel they know everything that is worth knowing, that they possess ultimate truth. They are thus contemporary counterparts of Pentecostals. They have achieved divine insight through mystic revelation. And as any Head is quick to point out, all the world's great cultures have been founded on visionary



Top right - Huey Newton, just after his release from Oakland County Jail. (Credit Naico Brown/ LNS)

experience.

The symbolic parallels between religion and political activism are overpowering. The protests of last May were fraught with religious symbolism: candlelight marches, vigils at the graves of the fallen martyrs, pilgrimages to local rallies, crusades to Washington to do ritual battle with the political infidels. The list is limited only by imagination.

The nascent, romantic revolt of the youth culture against the sciences and rationalism parallels the historical opposition of Western religion to these forces.

Judaism and Christianity have always been considered revolutionary forces, Man's first act was one of rebellion. And protesters who denounce the Golden Calf of Establishment materialism and the ends to which it has been perverted are, like Moses, denouncing the worship of false idols. Jesus's Sermon on the Mount is a devastating protest against the status quo.

Rather than believing in the transcendence of an omnipotent deity, the youth culture's animus derives from its attempt to transcend society. There is a sincere, almost utopic belief that we possess the capacity to produce an afterlife on earth if only our human values do not become distorted and destroyed by the technology. For them salvation equals liberation.

If one accepts the premise that political activism today is a secular manifestation of the religious impulse present in everyone, then it is an inescapable conclusion that the crisis facing American institutions today is not so much one of political legitimacy as it is one of religious

legitimacy.

In the ancient Near East, states were typically administered by a king who was also a priest if not actually a God. In Egypt the pharaoh was so sacred that his very name, "per-o", meant Great House, the temple in which the god lived. European kings down through the middle ages ruled by "divine right". And indeed, the American colonies were originally founded as theocracies.

It is a universal phenomenon that the formation of a political association entails subordination to a tribal god. If the gods are not called Baal or Astarte of Yahweh, they are called patriotism, production, and the flag. When people no longer believe in these gods, the institutions themselves which form the government become undermined.

The concept of the secular state is a relatively modern phenomenon. What we are witnessing today is a gradual reintegration of the religious and political spheres with the acknowledgement that the two cannot be separated. The secular experiment has failed and we are experiencing a new Reformation.

Our young political activists are trying to erect a new model of man, a responsible model. With all the defiance of David challenging Goliath, they are saying that we can and must be responsible for harnessing our political institutions which have somehow escaped our control and which have become self-perpetuating, that we must not submit to the juggernaut of a decadent society with the "that's life" attitude.

...Absurdity of freedom ...

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thus "free" only to the extent that their hopes, fears, aspirations, and manias coincide with those of the polity.

There is no freedom for the dissenter. To dissent is to make yourself unfree even if you considered yourself free before. It is to acknowledge that the polity still plays a role in your life. Freedom exists only outside the political continuum. Freedom is the complete negation of recognition of the polity. The only free person is one who lifts himself outside the political sphere. For him politics does not exist. Only apolitical man is free.

Thoreau once said, "The government does not concern me much and I shall bestow the fewest possible thoughts on it." Only by being conscious of the polity's existence and the way it impinges on one's freedom and yet ignoring it at the same time can one be totally free. UNfreedom exists in direct proportion to the amount of energy which one devotes to the polity. Freedom exists only when one devotes no energy to its maintenance or destruction.

It should be apparent that freedom as youth perceives it today, with its corollary, individualism, carried to their logical outcomes would mean the dissolution of the state. This returns us to the absurdity. Why then should political man enshrine freedom as one of his goals? Why pay homage to it in your Declaration of Independence and your Constitution? Freedom cannot exist within the polity, but only outside it. To vaunt freedom as a goal of the polity then, is to tear it apart, confound it, and do it a disservice.

Individualism or freedom carried to its logical extension negates the polity and hence it is absurd to discuss the concept of political liberty. Note also that freedom carried to its logical extension negates itself. To put it simply, there must be something to be free from. In a state of complete individuation (presupposing universal tolerance which would have been necessary to get there), there would exist no coercion. But the notion of freedom makes sense only in opposition to the notion of coercion. Hence, freedom would negate itself through its universal attainment.