


CULTS, THE OCCULT, AND SCIENCE

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Imagine, for a moment, that you have the opportunity to enter a vast, open-air amphitheatre, in which a huge, extraordinary carnival is taking place. All the usual signs of a carnival are there---multi-colored motion, balloons, confetti, large crowds, costumed individuals, musicians, whirling dancers. And, standing in front of several different side-show tents, are the old carnival barkers, trying to entice the crowd to enter their tent.

But this is no ordinary carnival. Rather, it is filled with modern gurus, teachers of all sorts of spiritual paths, and new age psychotherapies.  As we move closer, we can hear one of the barkers shouting. At first his words are indistinguishable. As we move closer, the smell of incense becomes quite heavy, and we can see the richness and variety of flowers surrounding the tent. The words take form:

Ladies and gentlemen, step right up!

Come, come, don't be bashful. Share with me. How do you feel? Let me know how you are. What ails you? Honesty. Be honest. Tell me, do you ever feel lonely, sad, depressed? Do you have any part of your body that is not functioning up to par? Do you feel concerned and confused about a world that is seemingly in pieces?

THEN TODAY IS YOUR LUCKY DAY! Here, in this container, I have the remedy and cure you have been waiting for. A mysterious, melodic, magical mantra for your mind, a secret word straight from

the Orient...drive away the troubling tyrants of your spiritually depleted soul; refind true meaning and sense of purpose, the zest and childish joy you once knew.

Trust me...

As the newspapers, magazines, television, and polls can attest, there is an enormous revival in America today of people attending, and participating in, the different "offerings" of our metaphorical carnival. Why is this happening? And what are some of the exciting possibilities...and potential dangers?

THE END OF THE THREE R'S: A NEW SAVIOR?

We know from the scientific research on mind control and the psychology of religion, that conversion and/or radical personality and attitude change most frequently occur immediately after the individual has experienced prolonged and pronounced feelings of confusion and perplexity, when the normal mores and traditional values no longer seem meaningful. What we may be seeing in America today is this phenomenon occurring on a widespread cultural level.

Specifically, we are becoming increasingly aware that our Western, rational preoccupation with the intellectual basics -- reading, 'riting, 'rithmetic -- has clear and obvious limitations. Our concern with technological progress and scientific advancement at times has been at the price of individual loneliness, a sense of loss of personal values, a lack of poetic wonder and enthusiasm in our often routinized lives.

We seek something more. We seek to break free from the shackles of a tyranny of the rational mind, our intellectual

heritage which, from Socrates to Descartes, has stated that true reality and true understanding are only possible through rational discourse and precise, analytical thinking.

And so, to balance our over emphasis on the rational, gurus of all sorts have emerged, peddling their mysterious wares. An anti-intellectual zeitgeist is born. We are ripe for new magic, a new savior.

In this zeitgeist, science becomes the Satan of the spirit, the rational mind its curse. *"Break the bonds. Follow me...I am the occult, the spiritual, the irrational, the new vision, the leader to a finer and better world. Trust, have faith. I can lead you to a new consciousness, the key to your inner powers. I am the ultimate guru of the mind. Believe..."*

And exactly because of the pain and confusion that are occurring during this era of our lives, because of our collective vulnerability and feelings of being out of control, people are turning, on faith, to new ways.

On the one hand, I believe it important that we applaud efforts which question the limits of our intellectual heritage and which try to posit a new vision of our human potential. During my own "search for the miraculous," when I lived in monasteries in Japan and China, I had powerful "altered state" experiences and gained insight into what I believe to be severe cultural blinders inherent in the Western rational approach. I acknowledge here my own strong belief that there is in our culture an overemphasis on a rational means of understanding the world. I have worked, and

will continue to work, in educational and clinical settings to ensure that our "Western" reality be expanded to include the education and treatment of the whole person. By this I mean the inclusion of the affective domain -- learning to understand and explore our feelings, fears, insecurities, ability to love and be intimate -- and how these emotions affect our physical and mental well-being; as well as experiential and non-intellectual means of understanding reality, the so-called altered state of consciousness, enlightenment, or Nirvana type of experience often spoken of in the East.

But, and this but is the critical link, but not at the expense of categorically renouncing the validity of our rational minds.

For, if we believe only on faith, we open ourselves to the dangerous side of cults -- the following on blind obedience -- as evidenced by the Jonestown experience, or, at an earlier time in history, by the cult of Hitler.

FAITH AND REASON: SCIENCE AND RELIGION

We need to somehow be able to balance a seeming paradox -- between "science" and "religion," faith and reason. When we believe on faith, we believe with our heart and soul. We do not allow for rational evaluation.

We become a Job who does not allow disconfirming information to dissuade us. We are Abraham willing to sacrifice our only son, in a blind obedience and faith, to a higher power, whether that power be God, someone who claims to be related to God, or someone who claims only secular, humanist inspiration.

Yet, as Paul Tillich noted in The Courage to Be, inherent in faith is skepticism, doubt.

And, I would add, also inherent in faith is the willingness to evaluate honestly, as honestly as one can, the beliefs one has, and how they correspond with one's own values. We cannot, must not foresake our individual responsibility to blind faith.

Lest this polemic seem one sided, let me state that scientists themselves are not exempt from belief systems (what Thomas Kuhn has called paradigms). These belief systems form the framework within which scientists observe reality. They set the stage for development of constructs, and then the testing of hypotheses through experimentation -- the ultimate result of our Western hypothetico/deductive reasoning. Scientists then have the responsibility to honestly assess the results of their experiments, and to change their belief systems based on the data. However, scientists are people, and they too can see disconfirming information as the product of "confounding variables, inadequate controls, improper procedures," or observe data with cultural "biases," thereby dismissing confusing results and clinging just as tenaciously to their preconceptions.

Let us look at the Eastern technique of meditation as one example of the blinders which may be involved in the Western rational approach. Meditation is a technique which originated in a cultural framework quite different from our own. Its purpose was to help an individual gain a non-analytical experiential understanding of oneself, and the world around. However, some in the Western scientific community a priori dismiss meditation

as a technique which produces an artificial catatonia, and is used by individuals to escape and avoid reality. Indeed, sometimes meditation may be misused in these ways. However, sometimes the meditation experience may result in a beautiful and quite harmonious sense of calm, giving a new sense of meaning about oneself, the world, and one's relationship to others. To dismiss this meditative altered state of consciousness merely because it does not fit into our Western rational view of reality seems an unnecessary and arbitrary rigidity. Thus, scientific blinders may be just as limiting as religious ones.

Therefore, I would argue that we need first to acknowledge and then attempt to break through the limitations of our scientific paradigms. However, not at the expense of overthrowing our rational heritage. We too easily move from a posture of "Let the scientists save me with technological advances" -- scientists as our new gods -- to scientists as devils, "Let the occult and the mysterious save me; let new gurus save me." Because our scientific heritage has limits, we discard it, and we look to an irrational, anti-intellectual, blind faith answer.

Where is the middle ground? How can we distinguish between the dilemma of what Sartre calls good faith versus bad faith? What is our responsibility as humans in this process?

BALANCE

As noted, we live now in a time when there is a backlash to the three R's and our scientific tradition. We are infatuated with what Hayakawa called "purr words": instead of precision and

segmentation we want intuition and holism; instead of rationality we want faith. The issues are just. The problem is that a pendulum swing to either extreme seems dangerous. Faith untempered by rationality can bring blind obedience and cultism of the worst sort. Conversely, rational inquiry, unaware of the limits of its own approach, can bring a reductionism that negates a fundamental humanism and beauty. As ee cummings noted in his poem, 'on spring', while philosophers ponder, study, and analyze the seasons, the earth responds with a flower.

The answer lies somewhere in a balance between these two extremes. Unfortunately, since this balance is so little sought after, and relatively unexplored, we do not know where exactly the balance lies, nor what exactly it would look like. There are no certitudes or platitudes upon which we can fall back, no pat answers or magical potions. Further, the attempt to achieve this balance means leaving the comfort, safety, and shelter of our preconceptions, our scientific and/or religious blinders. And yet, I believe we must temper our blind faith in science and our blind faith in the irrational and occult. My sense is that our very survival as a species requires an openness to the uncertainty and ambiguity of a middle way, as well as the passionate willingness to honestly work toward achieving this delicate balance.

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