

S5-- "THE THIRST FOR THE SACRED: FROM RANCHO SANTA FE TO THE LINCOLN BEDROOM"

The two big stories thus far this year - the Heavensgate cult's mass-suicide and Bill Clinton's sale of the Lincoln bedroom - have far more in common than seems immediately apparent. Both concern at root a profound dissatisfaction with the growing secularization of our public life.

If continued, this loss of the sacred threatens not only to render individual life meaningless, but destroy the underlying mystery upon which civilizations depend. To live well, we must believe that something of more value will endure than Madonna's movies, Disney theme parks, or Big Macs in Kazakhstan. Today's global triumph of scientific, consumer and entertainment values bespeak not only an end to history, but the very soul of societies as they have evolved over the past 20,000 years.

What is most remarkable about the Heavensgate cult, with all due respect to Ted Turner's deep insight into the human condition, is that they are not "nuts" as we normally understand them. The mentally ill are not usually highly-educated professionals creating value at the cutting-edge of the global economy, dressing neatly, studying and reading, and articulately expressing their beliefs.

And these beliefs are no more fantastic than those of the Jerry Falwells who believe that come Armageddon the faithful will be swept up into heaven and all non-believers destroyed, Buddhist beliefs in reincarnation, or a wide variety of Jewish and Moslem teachings concerning the beginning and end of things.

Of course, most of us are appalled by their decision to take their lives on the basis of these beliefs. But it is a cause for pause when journalists like CNN commentator Steven Roberts explain knowingly that they did so because of the "emptiness of their lives" - presumably in contrast to the full, meaningful and rich lives led by Washington journalists and politicians.

How many of us, if we are truly honest, have not also often felt an emptiness in our lives and present society? We may disagree with the way cult members chose to act on this experience. But we do ourselves a disservice by distancing ourselves too far from them. Let us not blind ourselves to the mere five degrees of separation that exist between the cultists, billionaires frantically searching transcendence by acquiring ranches, media empires or political parties, and the many of us who pass our days in equally banal activity.

What seems most relevant is that the cultists were reacting against the emptiness, consumerism and materialism of much of today's global "civilization." They wanted the something "more" sought by millions of other Americans engaged in a wide variety of spiritual or transcendent pursuits. The thirst for the sacred that they share with the rest of us seems more important, in the end, than their regrettable decision to die.

If Bill Clinton understood this, he would not have sold off the Lincoln bedroom. While his actions do not appear to be illegal or even unethical, they represent something far more troubling: the triumph of the profane over the sacred in what is one of the last remaining bastions of mystery in American life.

Mr. Clinton, a politician from birth, has failed to grasp that the Presidency is more than a political office. It symbolizes our hopes for a meaning that will survive our creature-deaths. When a President acts like a rug-merchant he offends not our laws but our deepest sensibilities.

Just as we remember our Founders not for who they were but what they represented, Ronald Reagan understood that a President need not be better than the rest of us if he performs his sacramental duties. It seems safe to predict that his funeral will be one of the post-war America's most moving spectacles, second only to the death of an assassinated President who also understood the importance of mystery.

To survive, civilizations need leaders who similarly symbolize sustaining values and principles that can survive individual faults, political corruption and business materialism. As Ernest Becker has noted, they need heroes who embody the hope of life beyond death.

And they need institutions and belief-systems that embody the mystery of life after death as well. If God has truly died, so too - sooner or later - will the civilizations that required His existence in the first place.

The fundamental issue facing American life today is how a corrupting political process can be transformed into one producing heroes; how arid and narrow-minded religious institutions can be replaced by organizations that provide authentic spiritual experience that unites rather than divides; how a decaying hierarchical education system can become one in which students are self-motivated to use tools like the Internet to explore a new universe of global knowledge and communication; how businesses can evolve into organizations that nurture people's souls as well as their pocket-books.

None of this will be easy. But it can be accomplished if we remember that the most important changes are those that respond to people's thirst for the sacred. Only then will people stop turning to those who would control their minds, and will we once again produce leaders who symbolize our best. And only then will the most questioning among us find something for which to live rather than to die.

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