

“On This Cube Will I Build My Church”

Fifth Estate Collective

1967

EDITOR'S NOTE; Timothy Leary, high priest of consciousness expansion, spoke in East Lansing Nov. 17th. His talk was covered in our last issue by Michael Kindman, editor of THE PAPER, a sister Underground Press Syndicate publication [see Kill, Leary, Kill, FE # 20, December 15–31, 1966]. The following was written after Kindman and several others interviewed Leary after his speech to a Michigan State University audience.

We had a couple of chances to ask Leary specific questions that had not been covered by the general discussion of his speech and, in several opinions, to detect an inconsistency or two in what he said. I respect Leary very much and was enchanted by his soft-spoken manner (my favorite adjective for his voice is “powdery”) and the sincerity (of course) of his presentation; I do not consider the faults I found fatal, so I shall not be too harsh. But please consider:

On the one hand, Leary says, “I don’t think anyone takes LSD for escape. You don’t escape on LSD.” “The people that don’t have anything going that LSD charges up stop taking it.” (That is, if your life is empty, LSD won’t fill it; it can only sharpen your appreciation of what is already in your life.)

And further: “It is inconceivable to us that the person who turns on with LSD doesn’t set to work to make his surroundings reflect the beauty he has seen.” And, “You have to turn on and tune in before you can drop out; dropping out without turning on is an act of rebellion and the best that can happen is that you’ll get power and you’ll be the next establishment.”

“This society can not hold together another 15 years. “ Within that period, many small political-religious-social communities will be forming, in reaction against the anthill tendencies of the larger society; the same return to basic forms of expression can be found in today’s music, art, personal religions, communications media (“the inevitable way that the new religion grows”).

Okay, I’ve juxtaposed all these statements from Leary’s visit (only slightly out of the contexts in which they were made) to show that attention to social issues, or extra-personal issues, is by no means lacking from the direction and structure of his thinking. Nor should it be, despite the increasingly general belief that, as Leary says, “no one (but you) can solve your spiritual problems” and “you’ve got to detach yourself from the blind chase.” Society is still with us, and most of it is still not turned on or dropped out; Leary seems to realize this in much of what he says.

But, when confronted with this question, Leary seems to react with the same shrinking back from contamination with which most people approach drugs.

To a question about social responsibility: “Repetition of the radical activities of the ‘20s and ‘30s is just as robot-like as going to a Sunday school in an Iowa small town.”

The changes in perceptions and life-styles sought by the psychedelic prophets is “much more far reaching” than any particular social change, including personal equality or peace; thus, for Leary, liberalism is meaningless. And what of the attempt which some of us see pervading the alienated’ generation of today; to synthesize personal and social concerns, to apply to political situations the lessons of psychedelics?

“You have to root out relentlessly that part of the culture that is within you. The first work is internal.”

(Minor inconsistency: despite this strong position, Leary is careful frequently to point out that he has “no business telling anyone else what to do”—which is also the reason he now calls the one-year moratorium on use of psychedelics that he called for last spring a great blunder.)

Anyway, it is hard to know what Leary thinks of the individual’s role in society. He advised one MSU student who is facing a court fight on marijuana arrests to concentrate his attention on his defense, because his conviction that he is right will help him, and the fight for legalization will be made up of many such small encounters. And yet, “You must detach your self from meaningless activities; do nothing from fear, nothing as a robot.” What does this say for social responsibility? I’m not sure Leary knows him self.

A further question that bothers me is why Leary seems unable to see himself as the single-minded prophet of a particular psychedelic style, whose lessons will be or, because of the speed of our age, are now being—applied through many more methods and in many more contexts than he can predict.

He assigns himself a cyclical role in history parallel to that of the visionary prophets of other religions, and, consistent with his stipulation that his religion is one of science and instant communication, many seem willing to grant him this position. Then why can’t he see that the psychedelic culture cannot be limited to the strictly spiritual, strictly dropped out strictly internal style of Leary and his Milbrook colleagues, or it will lose its place in the cycle of history?

No religion has ever grown exclusively by the beliefs of its prophets, and the new spiritual age promised by psychedelics will be meaningless to humanity at large unless its values (and practices, which are inseparable) can be translated into many different life styles for many different groups. Many followers of the psychedelic scene seem to be realizing this, but if Leary does, he kept it hidden in what he said at M.S.U.

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