

THE VIETNAM WAR AND AMERICAN RELIGIOUS SENSIBILITY

The Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, in cooperation with the Institute of Religious Studies of the Santa Barbara campus of the University of California, and through the keen interest and large generosity of Mrs. Eulah Laucks of the Center's Board of Directors, is undertaking an analysis of "The Vietnam War and American Religious Sensibility." The project is both an extension and revision of the Laucks series initiated through the Institute of Religious Studies in 1974.

The analysis will be conducted through a series of regular "dialogue sessions," a major conference, and public on-campus lectures. Participants in the study will include the Associates of the Center, selected members of the UCSB faculty and graduate students, together with a group of resource persons, psychologists, theologians, writers, historians, sociologists, political scientists, and cultural analysts.

The project has been prompted by an awareness that the War, because it was unlike any war in which the United States has been involved before, has profoundly affected all aspects of American sensibility, not least its religious orientation. Michael Herr in his book, Dispatches, a vivid portrayal and lucid analysis of Vietnam, understands the war and the music of the 60's, for example, to be expressions of the same current. He writes (p. 258):

. . . The Sixties had made so many casualties, its war and its music had run power off the same circuit for so long they didn't even have to fuse. The war

primed you for lame years while rock and roll turned more lurid and dangerous than bullfighting, rock stars started falling like second lieutenants; ecstasy and death and (of course and for sure) life, but it didn't seem so then. What I'd thought of as two obsessions were really only one, I don't know how to tell you how complicated that made my life. Freezing and burning and going down again into the sucking mud of the culture, hold on tight and move real slow.

This is confirmation of the awareness that the war was no isolated event, but is reflected in the music, art, literature, and the general social and cultural temper of the time. It appears to be linked directly to the counter-culture, whether as expression or antagonist. Both together gave impetus to a thorough revision of ecological and environmental sensitivities, eating habits, attitudes toward natural resources, etc. Such alterations appear to be reflected in stylistic changes in the lyrics and rhythms of song, in poetic writing, and, indeed, in styles of dress, gestures, manners, and habits.

The more fundamental shifts, of which the examples listed here may be signs or expressions, pertain to the ways in which Americans understand their relationship to that by which they are sustained. In this respect, the Vietnam experience may have more influence than any other single event in commending Asian religious aspirations to the American mind or spirit. This is not due to geographical factors, nor to the exposure to Asian culture that was experienced by a great many persons directly involved in the war, and to millions of others who witnessed the daily newscasts on television. It is rather that the United States, for the first time, was involved in a war it could not win. Heretofore,

winning implied victory. This time there could be no victory. Hence, the nature of the resolution and/or completion of conflict had to be redressed and reconceived. Heretofore, the west -- and not simply the United States -- had interpreted victory in very agential terms. The winner is the one with the highest score. The winner is he who has beaten his opponent, or, in war terms, has vanquished the enemy. In short, the presumption was that the winner is he who has accomplished what he set out to do, or achieved his objective. The same understanding of winning is supported by the major religious traditions of the western world. But the rhythms and vibrations of the Vietnam experience were different. There could be no winning in these agential terms, though there had to be an avoidance of losing in the same terms. The middle ground between these impossible, conceivable but repugnant alternatives was a delicately nuanced form of disengagement -- positive disengagement, James Dittes calls it -- which would not be misconstrued as defeat, and yet thoroughly revised the conception of victory, if victory it was or is. At the same time, positive disengagement invokes the spirit and disposition of Asian religious traditions, particularly the Buddhist sense of humankind's connection with the deepest elements of human life. According to this sense of things, agential aspirations are either quelled or, recognized for what they are, are transposed into forms of expression which honor the relinquishment of desire and the abandonment of the acquisitive nature.

In brief, there seems to be a direct correlation between the Vietnam experience and the widespread susceptibility to



E.F. Schumacher's counsel that "small is beautiful" -- a dictum and symbol that seems to have been translated into area after area, field after field, and aspect after aspect of our common life.

The ramifications run in all directions at once. There must be vivid effects of the Vietnam experience upon what Robert Bellah refers to as "civil religion" in America. Correspondingly, the alternations which Vietnam implies must register in corporate American life cycle terms (as Erik Erikson has portrayed these). But how? As a disruption of the dominant developmental process? As the next stage? As a signal, as in the Hindu tradition, that the period of time in which it is appropriate to be "householder" has given way to obedience to the pathway of renunciation? However it is interpreted, the same change must articulate with the recent revival of mystical sensitivities, indeed, even to a recognition of the propriety of the practice of "positive disengagement" as in monastic settings. Persons are turning to the monks and the spiritual teachers to be taught the practice of this new (or revived) form of spiritual discipline.

But there is more, following the leads of Paul Fussell in his book, The Great War and Modern Memory, that the first World War could not be fought effectively until the writers had learned how to describe it. What we may have in much of contemporary literature and artistic expressions -- and the books on this subject multiply weekly -- is an attempt to find adequate expression for the way in which Vietnam registers in our corporate experience and consciousness. And, following the Fussell insight,

there may be no way of coming to terms with the experience until we find a way to write, speak, or comment on it.

The latter may be the service the Center can provide. It can assist the process of expression. It can quicken the corporate consciousness, this time not in the form of "early warning system," but, nevertheless, in bringing the mood, and the anguish of its spirit, to birth or conscious articulation. In this sense, the project can be undertaken in a manner in keeping with the dictates of the spirit of recovery.