

Rennie Davis and the Guru

Arnold Jacob Wolf

At the height of the Chicago Seven (originally Eight) trial in 1969 the defendants came to our suburban synagogue to raise money and plead their cause. Almost a thousand people filled our auditorium to meet them and hear from each. They were by turns reckless (Abbie Hoffman), touching (John Froines), strong (Tom Hayden), stoned (Jerry Rubin), humorous (Lee Weiner) and intellectual (David Dellinger). But the chief spokesman, the one who stated their views most brilliantly and persuasively that night and often later, was Rennie Davis. Coming from a background of the 4-H Club and the Boy Scouts of America, middle-American Davis was the model of committed radical activist. Less flamboyant than most of the others, he often seemed more focused and more professional. Indeed, he was so courageous that some on the far Left rumored that he was a plant from the FBI.

But to us that spring night he seemed an incarnation of the native American radical, a populist in the noble line of Debs and the Wobblies. Many members of our congregation regretted the entire evening: because Bobby Scale (who didn't come) was close to Al Fatah, because the Jewish members of the Seven were a disgrace to their people, because they were all crypto-Communists, because congregations like ours should not mix in politics. But almost everyone, friend or foe, agreed that Rennie Davis had eloquently presented the view from the Left.

Weeks ago, years or decades later it seems, I heard Rennie again, this time in Yale's stately old Battell Chapel. He was not there to sell revolution this time

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but religion. He came as a convert of, and spokesman for, Satguru Maharaj-ji, the fifteen-year-old Indian "Perfect Master," and his cult. Rennie has shorter hair now. Though always the most dignified of the "conspirators," he is now even more handsome, soft-spoken and patient. Where he showed passion before, he is now all compassion. And where there was fire, there is now gentleness. The erstwhile revolutionary is now committed to a single truth: the Maharaj-ji is God Incarnate, the Teacher of the Twentieth Century. Rennie professes the same goals he always had—to destroy racism, imperialism, the Pentagon and RAND. But now he has more effective weapons, he believes—peace, love and, above all, The Knowledge granted him by his Master.

After peace missions in North Vietnam, Rennie Davis went to India last year where, in the infinite logic of Universal Consciousness, he came before Satguru. There, suddenly, as if living out a page from William James, Rennie experienced himself as "Blinding Light" and the Maharaj-ji as nothing less than God. From that time on he has had no doubts, no second thoughts, no reservations. He has given himself utterly to The Cause, and now travels around the world preaching a new gospel of faith in his Perfect Master.

The "evidence" Davis gives for his faith is not impressive: the multitudes who have come to adore the Maharaj-ji in India and around the world, doctors and scientists who have signed up, a long tradition of spiritual power, particularly in the East, which is said to culminate in Satguru. But his basic argument is irrefutable: taste and see! Anyone who seeks the Guru will, sooner or later, find him and find peace, says Davis. Skeptics from *Ramparts* and the *Berkeley Barb* have already had to admit that the Maharaj-ji is, indeed, God, and anyone else who checks him out, we are told, will agree. Davis knows how improbable all this may seem, but then is not a miracle even more miraculous when it boggles the

mind, especially since mind itself is in the thrall of Western materialism and conceit?

Radicals disrupted the Davis appearance, just as he used to do in an earlier phase. They shouted denials that he was "the real Rennie Davis," they sang "Solidarity Forever" and the "International." They held up signs reading "Hiss" or "Right On." They presented guerrilla theater to mock his piety. (The followers of Satguru themselves had presented a play earlier in which denizens of the Youth Culture were depicted in mime as addicts, sex maniacs and suicides or murderers—not very different from what Judge Julius Hoffman once thought about the Seven.) The radicals' mime was far less effective; their disruptions grew more and more strident and pathetic. Rennie played them all like fish, stringing out the line, waiting with a beatific patience, saying out his single Truth between interruptions, unafraid, certain, riding the New Apocalyptic to a Newer and Truer Redemption.

Something in America is over, something has begun. Even if we do not recognize the incredible Knowledge (*gnosis*, the old pagans, who never really died out, used to call it) proffered by Rennie Davis and his new comrades (recruited from the New Left, from dispirited elite universities, from the last of the 4-H kids off the farm, from middle-class Jewish families, from almost everywhere but the black ghettos—though perhaps even from there, if Rennie was right when he claimed Bobby Rush and Miles Davis as converts), we can only remark their élan and their obvious bliss. The radicals may say "there is no peace," and they are right too, but the followers of the Maharaj-ji have found some joy and consolation that passes our Western understanding. Davis told me that his new faith is where Juda-

ism was four thousand years ago, where Christianity was two thousand years ago. He and his fellow worshippers of Satguru are very sure that they are only the vanguard (50,000 followers in America already, they claim) of Universal Consciousness manifesting itself throughout the world in our time.

But the Maharaj-ji is not really like Moses (who died in the wilderness) or like Jesus (who died on the cross). He is rich, self-assured, profoundly triumphalist. Even Davis described how his Teacher was often accused of the most naked kind of exploitation, and even smuggling. But then, said Rennie, he is God, and God can do no wrong. That is a notion that neither Moses nor Jesus would have understood. The Maharaj-ji demands complete obedience of his followers, subverting their individuality or submerging it in a larger Whole. (Davis said: "He is the Perfect Master." The radicals shouted: "And you are the Perfect Slave.") Jews and Christians worship an invisible God, who does not obliterate them, but calls them to build His kingdom in their own world, which is also His. The Guru proffers what is ultimately an escape, however benign, however compassionate. Rennie Davis has perhaps found peace at last, the peace of nonattachment and passivity. He calls it Resurrection, but to some of us it looks like death.

I left Battel Chapel sad, confounded, enraptured and just plain scared. A student stopped me on the Old Campus. "Did you see what happened tonight at Calhoun Chapel?" he asked. "No, I was in the Chapel with Rennie Davis." "Well, you won't believe it, but someone just bent huge metal laboratory keys without touching them. It was real mind-over-matter. I saw it. I was there." He had experienced something uncanny, and so had I. God still works in mysterious ways, God willing, His wonders to perform.

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