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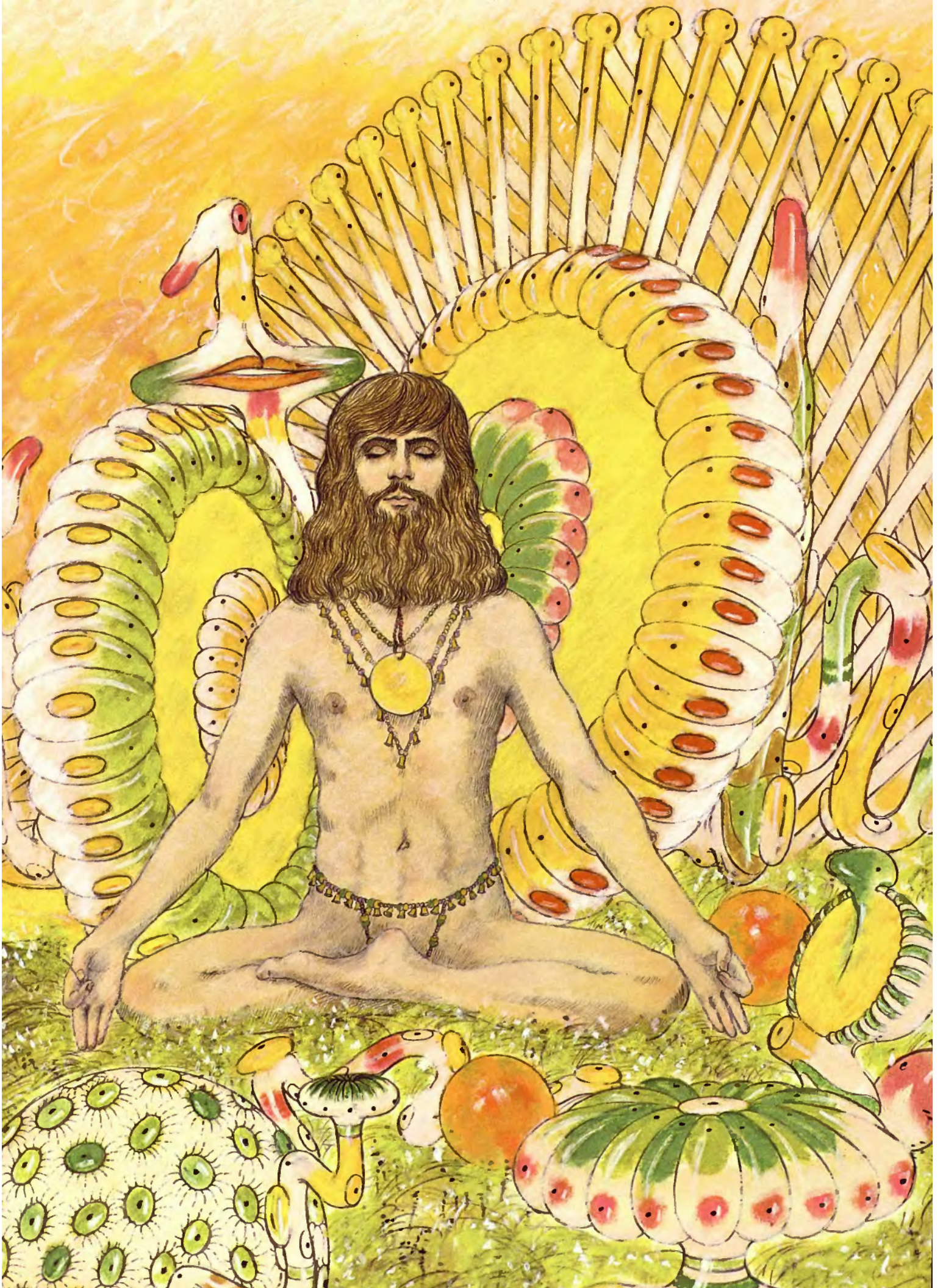
in california's salubrious clime, religious sects appeal makes mystic modes of worship bloom in lush profusion

article By **C. ROBERT JENNINGS** FROM Sallisaw, Oklahoma, to Bakersfield, California, they come, their grapes of hope mutating in violence to grapes of wrath. Jim Casey, itinerant preacher who never takes up a collection, goes first into the wilderness in search of God, then sacrifices himself for Tom Joad, then leads a strike in which he is brutally murdered by the fuzz. Before he dies, Jim says to his killers: "You don't know what you're a-doin'."

Political Pooh-Bahs called the late John Steinbeck a Communist for *The Grapes of Wrath*; and powerful religious groups branded it "obscene" for its masterly creation of Jim Casey, whom few readers had trouble decoding as Jesus Christ. Like Christ, Casey was a humanity-loving, put-upon prophet. He trundled his followers from a bleak dust bowl into a promised land—in this case, California—where, as Ma Joad

ILLUSTRATION BY KERIG POPE





had it, everything's "rich an' green." There, the huge Joad family sought their New Jerusalem, where they might glimpse a better vision of the ideal, found a new faith, maybe, and seek a utopian unity with some undefined godhead.

Wittingly or not, Steinbeck was also writing a parable for his own native soil; for no place on earth, before or since *The Grapes of Wrath*, has been home to so many God seekers, to people who play at God seeking and to people who cruelly prey on God seekers with instant religions and long-term financing. From the sensuously rolling hips of Aimee Semple McPherson in the Twenties to the psychedelically rolled hippies of the Sixties, California has played disinterested host to a bewildering gang of lotus lickers and Grail hunters both sincere and sappy, healthy and rheumatic, kidding and conned; and to a frighteningly motley throng of unholy zealots, ersatz psychics, faith healers, metaphysicians, cabalists, occultists; to mail-order mystics with exotic names, redeemers in everything from gold-satin robes to saffron saris and dirty-white loincloths, messiahs with missions either venal or benevolent, well meant or menacing—and sometimes both at once.

In San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, a listless young man with glazed eyes, Hindu beads and humble mien sits cross-legged, reading the life of Ramakrishna and meditating "upon God in the relationship of a lover." Parroting a spirited passage from the book, he remarks with a singular lack of spirit that his is "a reckless but religious love transcending sex." His button—for everyone in the truth-seeking, love-loving, hypocrisy-hating, past-denying Sixties has a label—shouts: MAY THE BABY JESUS OPEN YOUR MIND AND SHUT YOUR MOUTH.

Nearby, in the Haight-Ashbury district, where everyone is turned on or freaked out or doing his thing with passively contrived innocence, a freckled youth with a swamp of alfalfa curls and a stack of erotic *Kama Sutra* posters, says he is practicing "left-handed tantra dating from the Ninth Century A.D.—Indian, you know. You seek union with God, and especially the Divine Mother, through sexual intercourse with your girl." A proper pause for the listener he hopes to embarrass or shock, then: "Even the Hindu deities copulated, you know." He wears his manifesto on each side of a highly colored serape. One of the buttons reads: TEACH A COP TO PRAY; the other, TEACH A COP TO FUCK. "It's the same thing, really," he says sweetly, proffering incense and adding that Allen Ginsberg, the sadhu of this seminal city, tells the cops they "ought to be equipped with the mystique of an ancient mantra [chant] still used in India to disperse crowds," instead of routing the hippies with harsh words and

billy clubs. India is very "in" this year. It's not the weather, it's the humility, they say.

"You have to be out of your mind to pray," adds a wheyfaced girl with long raffia hair and psychedelic Mother Hubbard covered with beads and prisms. She is out of hers on marijuana, which she first smoked while embracing a bronze Buddha. "That's what Tim Leary says." Dr. Leary, a self-styled prophet who wears a bone-carved Egyptian mandala about his neck and white holy-man pajamas, claims to have launched the first indigenous religion in America; but *Ramparts* editor Warren Hinckle sees him merely as "Aimee Semple McPherson in drag."

Over at the Zen Center, which looks oddly like a synagogue, barefoot men and women in their mid-20s, faded jeans, rust-colored corduroys and mauve velours, practice *kinhin*, or walking meditation, hands folded meekly across stomach, eyes tilted downward or closed. "When you sit long hours in *zazen* [sitting meditation], the blood tends to collect around the loins," says one Zen novice. "It tends to make you seek, uh, wrong outlets—like those Buddhists in Japan who were caught drinking and screwing all over the temple."

Then he joins the others, chanting the "Great Prajna Paramita Sutra: Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva practice deep Prajna Paramita when perceive five skandas all empty. Relieve every suffering. Sariputra, form not different from emptiness. Emptiness not different from form. Form is the emptiness. Emptiness is the form. Sensation, thought, active substance, consciousness, also like this. . . ." A little sign on the altar admonishes everyone to RECITE SUTRAS WITH YOUR EARS. A little girl with a Mia Farrow haircut says: "There is no me and no you, no Abraham or Jesus or Mohammed—just God alone." The gongs gong beatifically; the incense is a sweet sandal flora.

In the raffish North Beach area, a bottle-bald man with leopardskin vest and demonic beard, who claims to be the Devil's emissary running "a charm school for witches," stages a piquant ritual to support his "Satanic Church" on the other side of town. He boasts that Barbara McNair is a Satanist, too. His black magic this night consists of the seduction of "the Grand Inquisitor" by a seedy trio of topless witches in filmy black. "The successful witches always slept with the Inquisitors and do right now," explains Satan. The Inquisitor, played by an ex-choirboy and "former divinity counselor for Billy Graham," flaunts grinding pelvis and pubic hair in the bottom half of a woman's baby-blue bikini—"to express the transvestite image," explains Satan. "We're all possessed of that animus; the duality of

man and woman is in all of us. The Devil himself is a hermaphroditic deity."

Back at his Satanic Church, a decrepit black house on California Street that is also his home, 38-year-old Transylvanian gypsy Anton Szandor La Vey sleeps with a 500-pound lion, lectures on witchcraft and demonology and allows the faithful to attend weekly "Magical Circle" rituals at \$2.50 a head. A sign on the door greets visitors with the warmth of a werewolf: UNLESS YOU HAVE AN APPOINTMENT, DO NOT DISTURB. With an appointment, or \$2.50, the visitor is greeted within by a live black cat and a dead ocelot leashed to black walls, and invited to sit on an ottoman next to a bare-fanged stuffed wolf. Drinks are served from a surgical Gurney.

"This is very serious business with me," says La Vey from the musty depths of a dental chair, flanked by bell, book and candle stuck in a human skull, a shrew, cat-o-nine-tails, cloven hoofs, trapezoids, pentagrams, talismans, amulets, a skeleton, secret doors, a demonological library (*The Satanic Mass, Biography of Dracula, Prenuptial Rites and Rituals*) and the stone altar on which nude girls, symbolizing "Earthly Desire," recline on leopardskin for Satanic weddings.

"There's never been a true Devil's Advocate, and never a Satanic Church before in the world," says La Vey in a soft, theatrically modulated voice. "I believe in the dissolution of the church concept of sin as we know it and, with it, guilt. I can see nothing wrong with indulging ourselves in the seven deadly sins, which are really virtues. Evil spelled backward is *Live!* Hell is a place populated by people forced to indulge in all physical and mental gratification, having as much sex as they want, eating what they please, going through *bags* of money. In sex magic, the greatest outpouring of magical force occurs during the peak of sex activity, or the orgasmic state. With the proper imagery, the proper time—especially while the victim is sleeping. In the passive unconscious state, the *working* will manifest itself. With charitable love, the greatest outpouring would be shedding of tears. In either case, catharsis is the result. Not everyone can be a sorcerer, because you have to control emotions so you can channel them into a very strong working force. If a person wanted to copulate with a beautiful girl at my ritual, I'd set up a series of vibrations that would put this karma into effect. . . ."

Outside, the neighbors are complaining that the lion roars at night and keeps them awake. "The lion takes dope," says one. Inside, an ex-assistant lion tamer for Clyde Beatty, who also doubled as calliope player in the circus, confesses to his pretty sorceress of a

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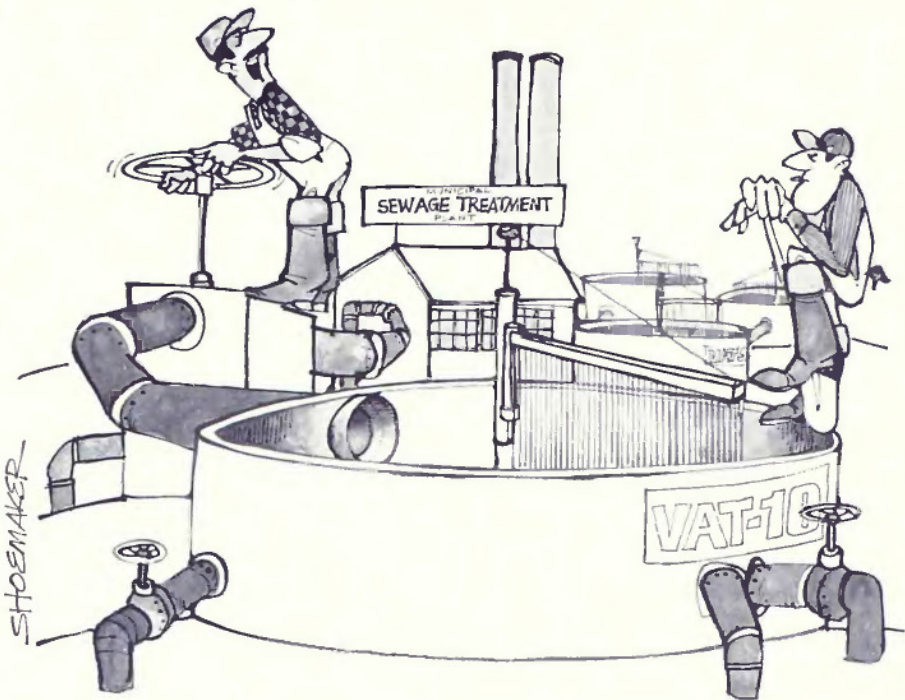
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wife that his ears aren't pointed enough for a really good Devil. With a heavy sigh, he takes off his red robes, lays aside *The Life of Rasputin* and strokes his Mephistophelean beard. It isn't easy playing unholy than thou. One arm resting on a piano, he smiles at some yellowing sheet music: *I Faw Down an' Go Boom* and *Just a Gigolo*.

In the scruffy Mission area, south of Market Street, an old Jew named Samuel Lewis sits under a portrait emitting "blessings from Ruth St. Denis," the disciples of mystical Islamic Sufism spread round about him. "I'm applying Sufi to the solution of the hippie problem," explains Sam, the self-acknowledged Sufi sheik of San Francisco. "They know there are states of consciousness other than the physical. I teach them meditation and love."

Just now, he is giving a lesson to eager youngsters in "the science of breathing." "The New Testament says God is breath," he confides. "Breath and life are one, but breath is more than oxygen and chemistry. It draws in the life force. It brings in life for health, for courage, for fearlessness, to overcome sleep, for longevity—of which I am the perfect demonstration. It needs a master—it cannot be learned from books." Sam tries to show a prize fighter how to walk up Nob Hill at full speed without losing breath. "The soul is the divine breath," he says, wheezing as if he could use a little more of it himself. "And Sufism is the reality, the universal outlook, in which you can reach such an attainment that you can have the peace of awakening. Sufis use love—they believe in God as *experience*. Love means self-surrender. Self-surrender, which is different from self-denial, is getting guidance from a teacher, from God or from yourself. The Kingdom of God is *within* you—that's an *actuality*, not metaphysics."

Sam Lewis turns to a young female acidhead and asks her if she would be interested in "the joy without the acid." She nods wanly. "Look into my eyes, then. Your eyes are *shouting* unhappiness. I want to teach you happiness." His animated face freezes into a Keaton-esque mask and he fixes her with the eerily hypnotic gaze of the big Buddha in Gump's. "I am trying to get you to nonthinking, to peacefulness. First, we're aware of the body. Second, we're aware of our moral natures, of good and bad. Third, we're aware of our mind; and fourth, of our heart, the center of selfishness; and finally, you enter the abode of peace, and peace is power *beyond* the physical world, and this is communicable. The whole mind becomes your servant. The whole world needs love and affection—see how a



"Here come de sludge!"

child responds to it. I am an old egotist. I have spontaneous prajna—wisdom in Sanskrit. Only God exists, and this is the supreme human experience. The science of the heart and higher consciousness makes the heart the center of our being, from which we enter into stages of rapport with the ever-grander portion of the universe. Complete love for mankind is not a metaphor but a way of living. Allah'ha, Allah'ha."

A scruffy young man with a gentle, abstracted air and cataracts of flaxen hair (courtesy Lady Clairol's "Born Blonde") is confused about Vedanta, a highbrowish Neo-Hinduism offering a modern interpretation of the classical Vedas, and Sufism. "The difference between Sufi and Vedanta," says Lewis straightaway, "is the energy the Vedantist uses to conquer his passions, Sufists use to find God. If you have a hundred units of vital energy and ten are sex, it's an important part of your life. Suppose you have a thousand units and fifteen are sex—sex has gone up rather than down, but it becomes so small compared with the whole—that's Sufi! When you say don't use your penis, you're paying attention to your penis. We don't waste time with that. In Sufi, as in Zen, the devil is the *ego*, not sex. The question is not whether you keep up sex but if you keep up God. Sex should be divinized, not forbidden."

In Santa Barbara and Los Angeles, the good swamis in the lovely temples of Vedanta say amen to that. Indeed, their view—which America's highly

venerated swami, Prabhavananda, compares with Emerson's concept of "over-soul"—is so enlightened they attract more than their share of young people with serious sexual hang-ups, trying to master if not divinize their demons. "Vedanta doesn't preach sexual freedom," says California's most eloquent Vedantist, Christopher Isherwood. "but it is not concerned with sins as sins. Certain things you do are an obstacle to enlightenment. Intense sexual attachment would be such an obstacle. But whether it's with a girl, a boy or a goat is very much beside the point. This applies to all the vices. The rules are individual, not laid down like tablets of law with 'Thou shalt not' written on them, not an authoritarian, dualistic thing of God *there* and me *here*. God is in all of us, and everywhere. In the classical age of the Vedas—Hindu scripture—the principle of blending worldly enjoyment with spiritual endeavor was approved by the great teachers. They recognized that, for the ordinary man, sensual desire is too strong to be repressed. So they recommended, instead, that the devotee should remind himself that God is present, at all times, within our lowest and grossest actions as within our noblest. 'The Lord is everywhere and always perfect,' says the Bhagavad-Gita [from the Hindu Bible, which Isherwood and Swami Prabhavananda translated]. 'What does he care for man's sin or for man's righteousness?' The worst act is at least the better for being associated with God. To believe otherwise is to sanction the hypocrisy of 'Sunday religion,'

which will go into God's presence only in the fine clothes of respectability, never in the soiled garments of the lustful everyday self." Small wonder, then, that Vedanta gets more chic by the minute.

The polar opposite of the Vedanta Society is the World Church, "the world's largest nonsectarian church," a blue-topped blimp hangar of a building in exhausted central Los Angeles, where O. L. and Velma Mary Lee Jaggers stand in unruffled state, like twin popes, cloaked in gold-and-silver bejeweled satin robes and wearing long white gloves, white stockings (no shoes) and jewel-encrusted crowns before the Golden Altar of the Revelation. It is a blinding pageant. "Twenty-four-carat gold," says handsome O. L. to the assembled multitudes, "and more than one million jewels! All are genuine and all come from foreign places; none are even made in this country. So splendiferous in beauty, individually set in the Christs and angels!" The congregation—thousands of Negroes, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and whites, old, ailing, indigent and gulled—applauds vigorously. O. L. smiles unctuously upon them.

"Unlike anything ever made anywhere in the world—a manifestation of the beauty of the Lord Jesus. Four years in the making and only half through. See the silver river beneath the throne of God—the water is *actually* flowing now. There are five hundred thousand precious jewels in the riverbed alone, the Euphrates River of Life that came originally out of the Garden of Eden. . . . God is coming here today. All your physical, emotional and financial problems will be cured here today. Now for just a moment, we're going to take a photograph. Will the liberators come forward. Watch the photographer and he will tell you what to do. He's the very best photographer I have ever seen. Very still, don't move. . . . When you drink of His divine blood today, you will leave God's house in perfect health. The twenty-four elders will now remove your golden crowns and place them on the table before you. I anoint the golden altar seven times. I place the seven lamps of fire upon you now. Miss Velma and I command the seven sacred spirits to anoint you with the sacred oil. . . . Oh, ring out the bells, bring His sacred presence down!"

The faithful pull thousands of bells out of bags and bodices and tinkle them till hell won't have it, as O. L. sings into his hand-held mike, to the organ strain of *The Bells of St. Mary's*:

*"The bells of the World Church
Oh, hear, they are ringing
They bring down God's blessing
On you and on me. . . ."*

O. L. has a rich, deceptively casual voice that is carefully contrived to sound like Bing's. He and silver-haired

Miss Velma are, with unsettling aplomb, leading their flock in "The Mighty Transubstantiation Communion Miracle." The elders forming a sort of bucket brigade from the majestic couple to human-high stacks of bread loaves and great golden vats of wine. Even the collection box is sealed with a gold lock. The congregation removes its shoes and, for three ear-shattering, eye-popping, soul-splitting hours, comes forward to be anointed perfunctorily from huge plastic bottles. The ceremony runs the emotional gamut from hysterical to epileptic. It is a sickening spectacle in a country of the blind.

In the Empire Room of the Beverly Hilton, members of the world-wide Bahai faith, which has some 2,000,000 followers, celebrate the Feast of Naw-Rúz, the Bahai New Year. The Happy People Chorus sings: "See the smiling faces, people of all races . . . let love and unity reign"; and well-fixed people of all races smile, sip punch, square-dance and discuss the next "fireside," in which members meet in private homes—Bahai has no ministry—to discuss the world, the flesh, the faith and its 19th Century prophet, Bahá'u'lláh ("the Glory of God").

Pretty girls in short, expensive dresses and long ironed hair smoke cigars and discuss "the oneness of mankind and the essential harmony of science and religion." A young hair stylist invites another to his shop: "I'm just developing my own style—Don Murray comes in."

A public-relations man takes offense when he is asked who the local head of Bahai is. "There is no head of Bahai," he answers indignantly. "There are no paid Bahai teachers; everyone in Bahai is a teacher. You can't go wrong when talking about *truth*, the oneness of mankind, the unity of the universe. Only Bahau'llah fulfills the promises of all the prophets. And Bahai just grows and grows; I can't give out any figures, but it's just fan-tastic!"

"Fantastic" is the word the hippies apply to the banal, like a copy of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Hippies don't cotton to Bahai any more than they do to beatnik bard Jack Kerouac, whose own religious cult has menopaused but whose dharma bums are still very much in evidence in California, crying out: "Let there be blowing out and bliss forevermore." But some, such as beat poet Philip Lamantia, have successfully metamorphosed into hippiedom, because they feel that "Christ says go out and find the bums, the blind and the cripples. He invites everyone, including the outcast. So there's no contradiction at all between Christ and a bebopper, a Beat and a hippie."

"Christ is with us here, baby," says a sallow-checked girl with stringy hair in Los Angeles' Elysian Park, scene of an Easter-day love-in. The cops have ac-

cused her of taking part in the singularly unerotic rites as an irritant to the Christian observance of the day. "So is Buddha. So is Krishna. You know Krishna?"

They didn't, but the robed, bearded, barefoot tribe at the Foundation of the World Fellowship—hidden from the world by rock caves and canyon oaks in the cowboy-movie country around Chatsworth—claimed they did, and intimately. Only theirs was a different Krishna, a too-mortal man named Francis Heindswatzer Pencovic, who looked like Jesus, ran around barefoot in flowing gold robes, called himself Krishna Venta and, right in the middle of the 20th Century, declared that even though he had served time for burglary, he was still the living embodiment of Christ. "I cannot lie to please you," he told his disciples. "I must tell you the truth in the sight of God. I am the Son of God." Many wept. Others shouted: "We knew it!"

Krishna Venta has since shed his mortal skin, but his apostles "walk humbly with his soul," concentrating daily and chanting, "Love one, love all, love Krishna," pulling cars out of ditches on the narrow roads surrounding them and taking care of the neighbors' children when their mothers are ill. "We're a humanitarian service group. You have to be in the philosophy for quite a while to understand."

Speaking is babushkaed and green-robed Bishop Elisha, a shy mouse of a woman who was, in some previous incarnation, just plain Aletha Browning, a dietitian in Denver, Colorado. "The name carries a vibration," she says joylessly. "And as we grow in understanding, our vibration is raised and our names are changed accordingly. Master changed his name twice as he grew. Our spiritual leader now is Cardinal Nekona—she's an English teacher from Denver." She is sitting in the fellowship's assembly hall and chapel, which members hewed by hand from local stones and telephone poles. There is no phone. "We had to take it out," explains the bishop, "because we never lock doors here and people came in and took advantage and made calls on the long-distance."

"I do believe Krishna Venta was the Son of God—we know it," she says. "There's been many Sons of God, every two thousand years or so. We don't believe Jesus and Christ to be the same. But two thousand years ago, the people, not knowing, said 'Jesus the Christ' and connected them. There are several places in the Bible that try to point out that the Christ wasn't the Jesus, someplace in *Matthew*. I'll have to study on that more. You're supposed to have a balance of mind here, but I'm not sure I do yet. . . ." Her weak voice and unlettered talk trail off forlornly. Birds and fowl and scrawny dogs drift in and out.

The bishop breaks into a little song: "God and I go in the field together. . . ."

"We can't kill a living thing. That's why we have these birds and those trees," she says after a while. "If we eat meat, we don't order the animal to be killed. If it's already killed, we can go in and purchase it. Many of us are vegetarians, though. But we don't even take the eggs from chickens, don't kill any of God's animals."

Only people. Convinced that Krishna Venta had indulged in considerable unhumanitarian intimacies with their wives, two former cultists planted 40 sticks of dynamite inside the fellowship's multicolored headquarters a few years back, cornered the 47-year-old prophet and blew him, themselves, five other adults and two children to kingdom come. "His death," says one observer, with heavy irony, "was certified upon examination of some less-mortal dental bridgework." In the ruins, which are unlikely to be compared with Pompeii in any future age, there stands today an enormous sign: LOVE YE ONE ANOTHER. SERVE YE ONE ANOTHER.

In the Temple of Tarot and Holy Qabalah, next door to a chiropractor off the Pasadena Freeway, a lady with a pronounced limp, a torrent of hair streaked orange and red, corduroy slacks and a sargasso of colored beads, introduces herself as "The Reverend

Ann Davies, the Prolocutor General of the Builders of the Adytum."

"We work toward helping to enlighten a person's mind and heart," she says in a harsh, nasal Bronx accent. "I am a Qabalistic temple," she chants. "I am dedicated to the perpetuation and dispensation of the Holy Qabalah and sacred wisdoms of the Tarot. I have an amazing history, whose beginning is lost in the mists of time. It is said the angels brought my message to man. . . ."

More colloquially, Madam Davies says California itself is just loaded with magic vibrations that free both flesh and spirit from "conventional" shackles. "There's gotta be a psychological condition here that lends itself more to research and greater freedom, without having to hang onto the old fundamental laws. It isn't so hot here it weakens the, uh, drive, y'know, honey? Less imprisonment of the heart and mind and, uh, physical being. There's a relaxed moral point of view; you know the unconventional attitudes of the movie industry, with their many wives; you're more immune to the shocks and fears, more free to investigate. California has a *psychic* atmosphere, a mental-emotional atmosphere that is related to the subtleties of livingness. You gettin' the idea? You feel that God is making love to you—we have temple romances all over the

lot. I can see you're a very beautiful human being—how old are ya, honey?"

In the temple, for \$5.25, a visitor might have learned something about "Sex Perfection" or, for a dollar less, bought some Tarot Keys, or even a heavy tome called *The Mystical Qabalah* (\$7.75); but he puts his money—\$6.25—on an all-wool "Esoteric Qabalistic Healing Service." Before getting down to "the spiritual impact of the Vibratory Divine Names and healing Qabalistic Chant of the Western Mysteries," however, he learns that Dr. Davies heals animals, too. "I noticed a growth in the mouth of my little dog Tzaddi," she explains to the faithful—a sad-eyed, unromantic-looking bunch—"and took her to our vet, who said it was probably malignant and that an immediate incision was indicated. It occurred to me that Tzaddi was as much entitled to prayers as her human elders and I included her. My concern deepened my meditative concentration and I did not go to sleep until I had achieved a feeling of peace."

Next day, Tzaddi's tumor had, of course, vanished, and Dr. Davies "rejoiced over this manifestation and proof of the existence and availability to *all*, even our little creatures, of Divine healing power." For her healing work, Dr. Davies wears a "royal-purple flowing

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velvet cape over my white robe with the hexagram."

In the Esoteric Service, she stands before golden drapes between two huge phallic poles that light up on top, and beneath enormous illuminated Tarot cards. The congregation joins her in the "Aquarian Doxology": "I affirm my oneness with all that is, life, eternal, sublime and triumphant. I *am* that life, now and forever. I *am*."

The Temple Choir chants something very much like "Yo-ho-heave-ho." Madam Davies abrades the ears again with: "Divine womb of creation, pervade me with thy love as I chant thy holy name. Hold me, oh, Ah-do-naa-yii, enfold me in thy light. . . . And now let us attune ourselves to the vibratory [that word again] formulas of Divine Creation. O sacred messengers of God, O holy ones, archangels of the sun and moon and stars, O life of wind and sea, of flame and form, bestow thy grace on me, thy magical power to still the stormy sea, as I walk in the will of God [heavy on the organ pumps]. Ra-fa-el, holy archangel of the East, clothed in the glory of the dawn . . ." etc., etc., etc. . . . "Amen."

Amen indeed. Yet, for talking in meaningless figure eights, and doing it more often for more people for the most amount of money, no cult can top that highly organized freemasonry called the Rosicrucians of San José. There, some 110 tight-tongued inmates, several full-time guards and thousands of visiting members of the Ancient Mystical Order Rosae Crucis move through electrically operated doors and romp about phony sphinxes and Neo-Egyptian temples and blather, via a global avalanche of defensive self-promotion and double talk, about being "the largest and oldest fraternity in the world devoted to man's personal development through the utilizing of his natural powers of mind and the simple and yet little-known laws of the universe and the mysteries of life." All that and more, much, much more, until the bones creak with tedium and the blood runs tepid.

In one of his more limpid oratorical nose-gays, Imperator H. Spencer Lewis, a shrewd old owl of an advertising man—with one eye on Egypt, the other on the stock market—explains his humble task as simply "the rebuilding of the human race and advancement of civilization." "The conclusions of Mr. Lewis," the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* discreetly observes, "do not seem convincing to objective students." Meanwhile, the visitor is asked to KEEP OFF STATUES and, even in the unearthly quiet of the Planetarium, the Akhaton Shrine or the Egyptian Museum, he is bombarded with such mind bogglers as: "Is human life the highest form of intelligence in the universe? Is there a primary energy that underlies all existence? Can some-

thing come from nothing—or did the cosmos always exist? Is soul an actual substance or a function of man's organic being? Does consciousness survive death?"

If it can survive all this meretricious waddle, it can survive anything, probably even death. If it really wants to soak up a few answers, it can fill out forms stating a proper motive for membership, affirming the practice of good citizenship and obedience of the laws of the land ("I will honor the flag; I will never be guilty of treason"), send a ten-dollar registration fee to the Supreme Secretary of the Supreme Council in the Supreme Temple, and remit four dollars a month in dues thereafter.

Once inside the secret brotherhood, the much-touted "esoteric wisdom handed down from ancient times can be imparted to the initiated." Though the Rosicrucians aggressively deny they are religious, their practices are patently a quasi-mystical mishmash of Egyptian Hermetism, Christian Gnosticism, Jewish Cabalism, alchemy, all manner of life-diminishing occult practices and much storm and fury. Hear Ralph M. Lewis, son of the Imperator, instructing the "Brethren of the Rosy Cross" who have proved themselves worthy of admission into the order:

"Take a deep breath, hold it as long as comfortable, then slowly exhale. Keep your feet separated and close your eyes. First, we shall begin with the simple process of purifying our consciousness. We ask that you deliberately call to the fore of your mind pleasant memories in your life which represented your most noble emotions and sentiments, relive for the moment the ecstasy and mental purity of certain past experiences [musical arabesques on flutes and violins]. Next, you will conceive yourselves as being a point of light like the flame of a candle: you will think of all else that surrounds you as being like an infinite sea of darkness, and formless. In this sea there is nothing. This sea is to symbolize the emptiness of your consciousness, free from all ideas except what is now being related to you. You will next conceive the flame, the light, extending its aura, its area of illumination into an infinite golden radiance. Gradually, your personality as an entity will disappear. The point of flame that symbolized you will *also* disappear. Then both you and the flame have become one with the golden radiance, that consciousness of the cosmic. Slowly, now, extend that light, see nought but the light and self [spooky cello music here]. Each exercise will find you rested, rejuvenated in body and mind. If the cosmic attunement is accomplished, great illumination as inspiration and intuitive ideas will be your reward. Let us, in closing, remember the words of the great Christian mystic: He said as man moves toward the Divine, the Divine moves toward him."

The string accompaniment swells into the banal strains of *Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life*. End of lesson. But if you keep paying your dues, you will have the thrill of participating in a grand old tong that boasts that its postage alone amounts to more than \$250,000 a year, representing 6,000,000 pieces of "literature" and 7,120,000 sheets of stationery that, laid end to end, would form a path of paper from New York City to Kansas City, or 1319 miles. As someone must surely have said before, there's far less here than meets the eye.

Down at the First Church of Mystic Christianity in Los Angeles, a plump lady under dark glasses and tinted tresses pounds a mosaic organ as the Reverend Edwin J. Dingle, known to the inner circle as Ding Le Mei, is introduced as "the true Super-Yogi of the Western world" and in a hypnotically luxuriant British accent spreads his magic on the paying customers: "I am rich, rich! [Very likely.] I am *strong*! [Doubtful.] I am *young*! [He is old.] I am love. [Oh, well, give him that much.] And now innumerable streams of living light are coursing down in the body. I *feel* it! God in human form. I am what compels the fluids of existence. Feel the glorious stillness of universality of life as we declare the living truth. It is done; it is done; it is *done*! Peace. Pee-eece. Peeeee-eece-sa. Peeeee-eece-eece-sa. Peeceeeeee," and he fades out, whistling.

For one dollar, Ding Le Mei will tell you why "sex energy is the servant of God" and assure you that he is a qualified mystic, because, pre-L. A., he was an "explorer of the far corners of the earth, delver into the deepest mysteries of forbidden Tibet, mystic India, inscrutable China, and was brought back from the brink of death in a Tibetan temple to learn this strange method, this long-hidden Wisdom of Mentalphysics, which is actually known to very few, even in the Far East, where the people as a whole are not ready for it."

For only eight dollars more, you can enroll as an initiate member in the Institute of Mentalphysics and continue "the weekly messages and all services" at home for six months for an added donation of four dollars per month. Then you are allowed to respond to the secret chants: "I am whole. I am strong. I am powerful. I am young. I am harmonious. I am happy"—whether you are any of these things or not—"and on that vibration shall we remain as the benediction is rendered for us. I shall withdraw from you," adds Ding Le Mei at service's end, "but I will not forget you. Bless you, bless you, bless you. My beloved, surrender to your eternal subconscious subliminal mind—what a power, what a *power*!" Explains a "preceptor" afterward: "We proclaim and teach the eternal truth of life—working



"It's a nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there."

through natural law in the Holy Trinity—body, mind and spirit of man. It's the final message. It's just thirty-five dollars."

In a little windmill beside a lake in the Pacific Palisades, under the "pure gold-leafed" lotus towers of the aggressively syncretic and self-conscious Self-Realization Fellowship, a lugubrious man with a bald head addresses a disarmingly meditative congregation: "May the cocktails of devotion induce God intoxication. When thy devotees are at prayer, from their eyes I gather rays of God intoxication. Blending the rays into a cocktail of soul fervor, I give it to my thirsty thoughts. They drink and drink, banishing hurts and worries. To those seeking solace, I offer this magic cocktail, served in transparent glasses of my heart's good will and sincerity. May drinkers of this elixir become so divinely inebriated that pain is forgotten forever. Shanti, OM, Amen." Hindu songs alternate with fundamentalist hymns; and on the way out, you can buy books and records right inside the chapel.

Afterward, a minihipped Mod takes a miniskirted girl with sherry hair on a minitour of the 13-acre Lake Shrine, which at first blush looks like Disneyland-in-a-dhoti. They compare it with Walden Pond, however. "Soul food," says the young man, tossing bread to the Australian black swans from the prow of a Mississippi riverboat. "God is the only Guru." The girl makes yin and yang circles. Above them, a life-size statue of Jesus Christ appears to float on a waterfall, his white-robed back to the Pacific Ocean and five new high-rises. Beneath Christ broods Lord Buddha, four feet high among the sumac trees and coral rocks; and in the Golden Lotus Archway rests a silver-inlaid brass coffer in which a portion of Gandhi's ashes are purportedly enshrined—"obtained after the Mahatma's cremation ceremonies."

Self-Realization Fellowship members meet on the bucolic paths and greet one another with a "namaskar," the palm-to-palm Indian salutation that says, "My soul bows to your soul." In a meditation hut, the minicouple necks before a sign in raised gold letters, imploring them to BE STILL AND KNOW THAT I AM GOD. Another sign, unraised, says: BERNIE LOVES RITA. The sentimental strains of Puccini waft over the lake, the black birds of paradise, the Abyssinian bananas, golden bamboo, mud hens, white swans from Holland, a rare bo tree and a wishing well full of money "that is to remind us to wish for the supreme gift: awareness of our one Heavenly Father, the Creator of all life and beauty."

So many people are seeking life and beauty—along with the Fellowship's own original creations, mushroomburgers and Himalayan snowballs—that S. R. F. has

more than doubled its membership since its founder, Yogi Master Paramahansa (Highest Swan) Yogananda, died in 1952. Only, he didn't really die. He "smilingly entered *mahasamadhi*—a yogi's final conscious exit from the body." Three weeks later, the mortuary director of Forest Lawn wrote S. R. F. excitedly: "The absence of any visual signs of decay in the dead body of Paramahansa Yogananda [observed through the glass lid of the casket] offers the most extraordinary case in our experience. No physical disintegration was visible even 20 days after death. This state of perfect preservation of a body is unparalleled in mortuary annals. Yogananda's body was apparently in a phenomenal state of immutability. No odor of decay emanated from his body at any time. And when the bronze cover was put into position, he looked as fresh and as unravaged by decay as he had on the night of his death."

Close friends of the revered, if perennially self-promoting yogi knew him as Mukunda Lal Ghosh, son of an Indian banker, and see him as a man somewhat more mutable than does Forest Lawn. "When I met him," says one of the great religious writer-gurus in America, "he told me, 'I wanted to do the work of a true swami. But I was starving in Boston and I realized I had to do things in the American way in order to make it.'"

Down at the Astara Foundation, also in Los Angeles, a sometime actress named Earlyne Chaney talks dreamily of "turning from film activities to spiritual matters [because] the call within, so lonely, so evasive, became a song celestial." Earlyne writes and preaches and heals via "telephonic inspiration from a Greater Source." For a five-dollar membership fee, plus tuition of four dollars "per unit," you can venture into "Astarianry."

In San Francisco, the enrollment fee at the weird Himalayan Yoga Academy is a whopping ten dollars and the monthly tuition, \$25.00; but then you get a crack at overcoming "self-created limitations," expanding your consciousness into the knowledge that you are "the Self-God which flows through all form and yet is beyond the mind." Near Needles, California, meanwhile, members of the Native American Church munch on the terrible-tasting psychedelic cactus bud peyote, from which mescaline is derived, as a regular part of their communion services, in which they seek "the beatific vision" Aldous Huxley saw—and recommended.

Now the magic wheel—or hexagram or trapezoid—comes full circle: to the Neo-Romanesque Angelus Temple in rundowntown Los Angeles, a vast, wealthy, pulsating monument to the lady who landed there 50 years ago with ten dollars and a tambourine: Aimee Semple McPherson. Within six years, Sister Aimee had a \$1,500,000

temple, a \$25,000 radio station, a 100-voice choir, a xylophone band, more charisma than all the evangelists in Christendom and a fanatic flock now estimated at 250,000, largest evangelical spread on earth. There, in the 5000-seat auditorium, they don't even whisper that Aimee was thrice married, accused of shacking up with her radioman in Carmel and finally prosecuted for "immorality," nor that she died of an overdose of sleeping tablets in the arms of son Rolf. Aimee didn't die any more than Yogananda: "God called His handmaiden home to be with Him forever." is how it was. And how it will be forevermore. Even H. L. Mencken was moved to utter, though cynics say sardonically: "Unless I err grievously, our Heavenly Father is with her!"

Today, the Angelus Temple appears to pay more attention to filling the coffers through faith healing than through theology. A 101-year-old elder takes the hand of a nervous 37-year-old man and commands: "Say, 'I am in need!'" The younger man says, "I am in need." The old man says: "In the name of Jesus, touch this body and make him whole." Then the mixed bag of a congregation raises its arms to the Lord and shatters the painted sky-dome with *He Touched Me*—and not the one Barbra Streisand sings, either. The Reverend Milton W. Ellithorpe, a handsome evangelist and head healer around the temple, admonishes every man, woman and child to "shake hands with at least three people around you, say to them, 'I believe, God.' Say it, brethren, say it. Praise the Lord, hallelujah, amen."

A fiddler clambers on stage and saws away at *How Great Thou Art* and is applauded vigorously. There is much frenetic wailing and hysterical outpourings in undecipherable languages. The Reverend Ellithorpe speaks of his visit to the Tower of London "and all the kings that were there, but there's gonna come a day when there's gonna come another King—'oh, now I see the crimson wave'—amen, hallelujah, praise the Lord. You could bring in the finest talent in Hollywood, but if Christ wasn't in their heart, they couldn't sing it like you folks. . . . 'The cleansing stream I see, I see. I plunge, and oh, it cleanseth me'—praise the Lord, oh, praise the Lord. . . . I shall deliver you from the sin-sick soul today. . . ."

Before the main event, little old ladies with hot-ironed curls and blue-and-white robes pass the collection plates—twice. "Glory to ya," says Ellithorpe, "oh, glory to ya." Time for "The Testimony." "My husband has diabetes," says a pretty middle-aged woman, rising, "and he fell off the roof and broke his foot. It's harder to heal with diabetes. I came here and asked for prayer while he was being operated on. His foot's all

healed now. But my mother-in-law fell sick and was in the Camarillo State [mental] Hospital. We prayed for her. I said, 'She's not gonna die' and God raised her right up—gave her two more days of life. Now I'm prayin' for my father's cancer."

"God bless ya," sings Ellithorpe, smiling the supererogatory smile of a side-show barker, his head a stormy wine-dark sea. "All glory be to Him. O holy, holy, holy, wonderful, wonderful. He is not just the Savior but the Great Physician in the Sky." His brawny arms flail the air and seem to embrace the multitudes. Then he reaches into a pile of letters and says healing prayers for people "with cold clammy sweat and a sore in my nose, too" and for people "with bad husbands" and for one "with both a crooked ankle and crossed eyes." He reads letters from a woman asking prayer for "my trip to Palm Springs" and from a man asking prayer "for the tenants, that they will pay me for my back rent." "Amen, amen. This is the moment. God is healing us here today. Oh, glory to ya. Are ya glad He's a great physician?" Yearning choruses of "Yea! Yea!" And reminders that the old-time religion, like Elvis adoration, is perhaps little more than repressed sex.

Afterward, one learns from a studious temple watcher that Rolf, who bosses the place, avoids publicity the way his

mother sought it, "is vague and homey and looks like the man who comes on stage from the side and takes the third seat from the center. But he has a Scotsman's knack for paring pennies and replenishing coffers, though he says that soul winning is still the one big business of the church."

Curiously, California itself is not shocked, embarrassed nor galvanized into tremors of alarm or guilt or pity by any of these stomach-turning spectacles. (Let it be noted, however, that the grand marshals of the parade of mendicants, aged and ailing in places like the World Church and Angelus Temple, or the magicians who run Temples of Tarot and Mentalphysics, are light-years in deed and spirit from such solid, time-tested faiths as Zen, Sufism, Bahai and Vedanta—wherever they are practiced.) California is, on the contrary, rather proud of its careless ability to take it all in stride, like topless shoeshine parlors, nutburgers, frosted papayas or smog. "We are broad-minded in a broad-minded city with a broad-minded citizenry," says a high L. A. police official, in explaining why there is "no organized or routine investigative force" assigned to cults and sects—culling, crazy or conning. "The only time we're the least bit concerned is if someone comes in alleging fraud; then we investigate the crime itself on the basis of a signed com-

plaint." Then, with chilling truth, he adds: "But most people who are taken won't believe they're being defrauded till the day they die."

But why California—besides the "psychic atmosphere" claimed by the occultists and the Satanists' westerly prayers? Because at bottom, says one of the state's foremost cult watchers, "almost everyone who comes to California sees himself as a redeemer. Most of us wisely and firmly suppress the notion and stick to real estate. But a substantial number do not. They come here and drink the water and soak up the sunshine and become convinced that the kingdom of heaven is, indeed, at hand. And there is always someone around who, for a small contribution, will show them exactly how to get there. It's easy to sneer. But who would care to say for certain that the realtors are right and the prophets wrong? Perhaps this century, so full of turmoil and longing, is about to give birth to some new, universal church. If so, California, through the sheer laws of probability, is likely to be the New Jerusalem, leading mankind to a new era of universal brotherhood and peace. Perhaps I might even lead it myself. Contributions will be eagerly accepted."



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