From Slogans to Mantras, by Stephen A. Kent

reviewed by Mark Oppenheimer in the September 25, 2002 issue

Historians have generally avoided the topic of religion in the 1960s, while sociologists often treat religion with charts and graphs but with curiously little understanding of what it's like actually to believe in God. *From Slogans to Mantras* makes the typical secular assumptions--Stephen A. Kent never considers that religion might occasionally stumble onto the truth--but it has a concise, lucid argument: "The combined experience of growing frustration over the perceived failure of political and countercultural protests to end the Vietnam War was the predisposing factor for the massive youth religious conversions that took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s." As young people saw that rallies would neither end the war nor topple the capitalist power structure, they turned to religion to achieve those goals.

This is an important twist to an old argument. Sociologists have argued that people look to religion for structure or meaning; according to this argument, burnt-out activists, bereft of purpose, would find a guru to worship in order to have a new reason to wake up in the morning. But Kent is suggesting that ex-activists who turned to alternative religions like Hare Krishna, Scientology or Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church were simply looking for new means to carry out the same radical politics. They turned to chanting or yogic meditation not because they had lost their political ideals but because they wanted to try all possible means of achieving them.

Kent's evidence comes mainly from alternative press articles and from 20 interviews with activists who, 30 years ago, turned to religion. The most persuasive passages show how the swamis and gurus themselves used the rhetoric of radical politics to attract disaffected activists. It's fascinating to read, for example, how Scientologists planted articles in a Los Angeles alternative newspaper attacking the IRS and the FBI; by attacking "the Man," Scientology made itself attractive to frustrated radicals. The Unification Church, "the Moonies," were anticommunist and pro-Nixon, but their emphasis on world peace made them, like the Hare Krishnas, appealing to antiwar

activists tired of shouting at a Pentagon that would not listen.

While Kent may be right that alternative religions played at radical politics to win converts, he's less persuasive in arguing that the politics are the reason that the converts joined. Some of his interviewees are just sad drifters who seem neither to have been very political nor to have become very spiritual. Harinam Singh Kalsa, for example, was a Toronto hippie who "discovered the free school movement, absorbing the progressive ideas of Vermont's Goddard College, which he hung around for a while but did not formally attend." In 1972, he returned to Toronto and joined a Maoist cell called Newsreel, which "distributed political films." He drifted into a group that sent literature into North American prisons to liberate "prisoners of war." After Newsreel disbanded, Khalsa "became a distributor of honey throughout the city, and he soon introduced Toronto to various nut mixes." In 1975, he discovered Yogi Bhajan's Healthy Happy Holy Organization, which in 1978 he formally joined.

Khalsa is supposed to exemplify Kent's model of political activists turning toward religion to achieve their revolutionary aims. But as we can tell from this short précis, Khalsa was never a real activist or much of a spiritualist: he was a flake. He flitted from one fly-by-night, improvised, storefront group to another. That some of his early dilettantism was political and some of his later dilettantism was religious proves nothing--especially since Khalsa seems to have a rather peculiarly narcissistic imagination, which Kent is happy to indulge: "he soon introduced Toronto to various nut mixes"?

While there don't seem to be factual errors in this book, it is a bog of fuzziness. Kent frequently uses equivocations like this: "Returning to Ann Arbor to finish her degree (in, I believe, fall 1971), she and a girlfriend lived in a teepee community outside the city." Couldn't Kent have called the woman to find out what year it was? Or called the registrar in Ann Arbor?

Kent does not muck about in the thorny question of just how many activists turned to spirituality; he's content to speak of "massive youth religious conversions." No good research exists to justify such a claim. But if we were, on Kent's behalf, to make a more modest claim--that many young activists did turn to religion, and we ought to wonder why--then we may grant that Kent offers a thoughtful new thesis, one supported by well-chosen, mostly accurate evidence.