

The New Believers

America has had its share of odd couples in recent years but none has been odder than the 1973 match of Chuck Colson and Rennie Davis. In 1973, each blissed out in new feelings of religious fervor. Both were hardly into their new discipleship when they came forward to speak in new tongues, providing a happy soundtrack for their amazing performances. Although the torrid devotion of converts Colson and Davis is to different lords—Colson to Jesus of Nazareth and Davis to Guru Maharaj Ji of Houston, Los Angeles, India and air routes in between—both have in common a willingness to tell the world of their new enlightenment. In forsaking old allegiances—Colson to his White House political tactics and Davis to marching, rallying and selected tantrums for peace—these new believers decided not to forsake the one temptation it might be thought they would happily be rid of: talking to the press. Instead, both have gone on record about their hot piety, almost creating a new beat for the working press—covering the Millennium.

It promises to be an easy beat, little legwork but lots of note-taking. In fact, accurate notes are not that essential; Colson's comments on instant mysticism are interchangeable with Davis'.



Charles W. Colson

The former White House hardtalker told *The Washington Post* that he now feels "a great inner serenity, a great relief in a sense, really a new life that, in a way changes your whole attitude about why you're here and what you're doing while you're here. And it's a great thrill." Davis feels the tingle, too. In the Houston Astrodome, while waiting to kiss the feet of his guru, he told a media happening about "feeling this incredible joy inside your soul. Everywhere you go you are just beaming. It's like you had an overdose of a love potion of some kind and you're in love all the time."

Being taken over by the divinity is expressed in similar words by the two. Colson: "I think I realize now that your abilities as an individual are much more limited than I believed them to be before and, if you have a relationship with God, that enables you to call upon him for the strength that you otherwise try to summon out of one miserable body. . ." Davis: "You should just take this knowledge and realize its power and then you see that that's the only aim of human life. That everything else is given. Everything is going to be given to us including the first thing which was our own life."

From the same embankment, both see mankind playing in the fields of the Lord. Colson: "I really believe God works through people in ways each of us do not realize and cannot comprehend." Davis says that "there is something that is holding this together more than just faith."

The questions raised by the conversions of Colson and Davis, and by the tender words now coming from mouths once known for emitting the harshest of secular talk, have nothing to do with doubting the pair's sincerity. Religious faith may be a big blowout, it may be the only last reality; no one knows, but everyone in his own sincerity chooses and is respected for it. Skepticism is too important to be used up on religion, so long as some godlike politicians are around giving us reasons to disbelieve them. What is unsettling about the pronouncements of Colson and Davis is the speed in which the public was given their new enlightenment. It suggests that the importance of the Colson and Davis conversions is not that a new faith has

taken hold of them but that their old fervor for espousing an almighty cause is still their thing.

This is particularly striking in Davis' public behavior. The skilled movement organizer deftly planning and publicizing antiwar rallies is now pushing the same buttons for the jowly Indian kid-god. It's the New Mobe, Xeroxed, this time not to bring down the imperfect Richard Nixon but to raise up the Perfect Master. In a 1971 Washington

peace rally, Davis wanted to "organize the country to compel this government to stop this war." Similar unlikely visions were expressed by Davis in Houston when his divine adolescent recently popped up for a mass seance; Davis would be thrilled "if a UFO would come out of the sky tonight and land outside the Astrodome. And space saints would walk out and come into the Astrodome and prostrate at Guru Maharaj Ji's feet." Take away the difference between the old and the new cause of Davis, and his fervent actions—organizing rallies, reviving the press, speaking in messianic tones—have not changed at all. Because of that, it is impossible to take him seriously, except perhaps to order up some "Free Rennie" buttons. Davis' change of ideology is not accompanied by a time-tested change in behavior, the kind such a doctor as St. Benedict referred to in his 6th century rule; there he demanded "a conversion of manners" from those who appeared at the door gushing in mystical syllables. Over the duration, the conversions of manners—called lifestyle today—was the only test Benedict knew for determining the true seeker from the larkist.

The uneasiness created by Colson's conversion is not so much in the lack of depth to his utterances—how similar his prayer-breakfast theology sounds to that of the White House preacher-in-chief, Billy Graham—as in the celebrity in which he presented them. In the history of authentic conversions—meaning the Elmer Gantry conversions—are excluded—the new members of the faith always either kept silence at first or did their penance immediately. America's most celebrated authentic convert was Thomas Merton, a Manhattan worldling who embraced a new faith but then wasn't heard from for



Rennie Davis

eight years. When he did speak via an autobiography—even then, written under obedience—the public could measure his new faith against his new behavior: They matched. There was indeed a conversion of manners, gained after years of painful struggle and costly austerity. Even then, nowhere in Merton's writing does he ever presume to talk of his own prayer life. Yet what a giant like Merton dared not do in 27 years of intense and costly religion, Colson does almost immediately, taking us into the privacy of his spiritual life by announcing about his critics, "I'll pray for them." A style of ugly condescension is in that statement, as if Colson is dismissing his critics as fools who haven't yet seen the light but might if Colson prays for them.

The full story of the Colson and Davis conversions won't be known for some time. We are not even fully sure yet about Dorothy Day's famous conversion, even though she's been serving the poor for 50 years now since her atheistic youth. The words of Colson and Davis are stirring and provide fine copy. But as for documenting their words with costly actions, that is still to come, presuming that no new causes come first and capture their strong fervor.